

THE ZEN REVOLUTION

THE LIFE
THE PATH
THE WAY THROUGH

H.GREVEMBERG

ZEN NOIR
EXISTENTIAL

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REVOLUTION

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IN THE OLD DAYS THERE WAS A LAKE
GUARDED BY A FIERCE DRAGON
FOR DEEP WITHIN IT WAS A GREAT TREASURE
A MAGICAL PEARL
ALL THE VILLAGERS KNEW ABOUT IT
BUT FEW DARED TO LOOK UPON THE DARK WATERS
ONE MAN TOOK IT UPON HIMSELF TO EXTRACT THE JEWEL
HE BROUGHT A BUCKET TO THE LAKE'S EDGE
AND BEGAN FILLING IT
CARRYING IT SOME DISTANCE AWAY TO POUR IT OFF
SEEING THIS, THE DRAGON WAS AMUSED
HE ROSE FROM THE DEPTHS TO WATCH THE PROCEEDINGS
BUT THE MAN CONTINUED AS IF NOTHING HAD OCCURRED
FINALLY THE DRAGON SPOKE
"WHAT ARE YOU DOING YOU FOOL!"
DO YOU THINK YOU'RE GOING TO EMPTY THE ENTIRE LAKE
WITH A SINGLE BUCKET?"
THE MAN SPOKE WITHOUT BREAKING HIS STRIDE
"NO, BUT MY CHILDREN, OR MY CHILDREN'S CHILDREN WILL."
THE DRAGON WAS STRUCK BY THIS
SO MUCH THAT HE SANK BENEATH THE SURFACE
WITHOUT ANOTHER WORD
MOMENTS LATER HE REAPPEARED WITH THE PEARL
WHICH HE GAVE TO THE MAN
WHO LOOKED SUSPICIOUSLY AT THE DRAGON
"WHY ARE YOU GIVING THIS TO ME?"
"I REALIZED YOU WOULD NEVER STOP."
- FROM A TALK BY A WESTERN ZEN MASTER (ORIGIN UNKNOWN)

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INTRODUCTION

This is a time-lapse view of the life of an adept as he struggles through the mire of Western Zen. What occurs here is a revolution — a complete, and final, break from the institution and the tough conditions he faces. This is not a treatise on mindfulness, staying in the moment, holding the *wadu*, whatever dialectic. It's something personal that refutes the machinations of dogma. As much lived as digested, it's an often cathartic process that reveals a great deal to those in the trenches; a careful, meticulous account that doesn't give credence to any aspect of the path, instead rejects everything false, wooden, unrealized. Ultimately it's a story of liberation and its enormous cost.

The intent of the author is to reveal the path, the life, in

accurate detail, what it's really like, what it requires — to save the aspirant's time and energy, that it isn't exhausted in meaningless details. If it's in your heart, if you're truly driven to resolve the great matter, above all else, you'll recognize in the flow of events the way we all must proceed. Surprisingly, a great deal of the work is external. In fact, the breakthrough described in *Chapter 20 – The Door* was only possible after he'd finally surrendered completely, held no concerns. As he mentioned in the essay *The Orgasmatron*, "Don't assume, because of your superior breeding or superhuman abilities, that it won't require going to the end of the earth to accomplish this task. It requires the whole life, exactly all of it. You can't hold back even one percent."

In *Quadrism* he notes, "Liberation doesn't mean seeking refuge from the tumult, it's that you don't require anything external. This drives a partner mad. How to get the hooks into you? You can't be manipulated, rather you decide to take care of something or someone because it's correct for the situation. If you have a criminal type in your life, and I always seem to, this completely boggles their mind. There's always a setup, a lure — but if nothing interests you… an interesting dynamic, practically unknown — living in resonance with the world, for the pleasure of it. Not constantly seeking things, because

the beast has already been appeased. It's not a discipline. There are no restrictions. It's the active principal of meditation actualized in the flow of events.

In formal meditation there's a long process of training, like learning the scales of a piano, which does require a great amount of discipline. Once this has been mastered and you're able to penetrate through to the Absolute, or more accurately, if your life brings you to that point, then the cessation of thought, then the accord with the universe; the great peace.

So let's look at the path of freedom, shall we? It's not what you think. You can't get there from where you are. Not in one piece. It requires a massive failure/blue screen that can't be resolved. You can't just shut the thing off. The timing has to be right, and it has to be real — the shutting down — meaning there's no alternative. No one can do it because there's always something on the agenda. That's why so many who try their hand at this don't succeed. After the break, a long process of refining, a long burning in the fire of practice, and again the world… and only you will know when the soul is freed. Only you can describe it.

The problem of pulling out, there's always a part of you that remains. The soul can't be simply abandoned."

If we are to carry the torch forward, and we must, we

can no longer paraphrase the words of the masters, or merely adapt them into a cookie-cutter approach to everyday life, or worse, conform to someone's *dream of the unicorn*. We're entering a new paradigm for Zen in the West: toward the individual.

SEASON ONE

DISCOVERY

THE PATH BEGAN ON ITS OWN
THERE'S NO WAY TO EXPLAIN IT
I WASN'T INFLUENCED BY ANYONE AROUND ME
THERE'S NOTHING LIKE ZEN IN THE DEEP SOUTH
IT MUST BE EMBEDDED IN ALL OF US
THE ETERNAL QUESTION
THE PERCEPTION OF THE UNIVERSAL SUBSTANCE
THE UNDERLYING NATURE OF REALITY
IS WHAT EVERYONE STRIVES FOR ULTIMATELY
IT'S NOT FAR FROM WHERE YOU ARE
IF YOU'VE EVER LOOKED WITH WONDER AT THE STARS AT NIGHT
OR FALLEN IN LOVE
OR BASKED IN THE GLOW OF A BEAUTIFUL SUNSET
YOU KNOW WHAT I'M TALKING ABOUT
THE PATH OF THE ZEN IS ONE OF COMPLETE IMMERSION
GOING DEEP WITHIN
TO THE UNIFYING JOY OF EXISTENCE
"OUR TRUE NATURE IS, IN THE HIGHEST TRUTH
DEVOID OF ANY ATOM OF OBJECTIVITY
IT IS VOID, OMNIPRESENT, SILENT, PURE
IT IS GLORIOUS AND MYSTERIOUS PEACEFUL JOY
AND THAT IS ALL
ENTER DEEPLY INTO IT BY AWAKENING TO IT YOURSELF
THAT WHICH IS BEFORE YOU IS IT
IN ALL ITS FULLNESS, UTTERLY COMPLETE
THERE IS NAUGHT BESIDE."

HUANG PO (?-849)

one. FALL TO THE GROUND

The forests in southern Louisiana grow with such ferocity that whatever touches the ground is quickly devoured, criss-crossed in vines, tangled weeds, elevated roots, with tendrils stretched taut like something more sentient pulling the rotted thing down below. The whole town of Sweetville was consumed long before I was born. In fact, all that remained were old logging roads and fire lanes that led nowhere, and a place near the mayhaw trees with a broken slab poking out of the briars. My father remembered the people who'd lived there once, but they're both gone now.

There were a few houses down the road, mostly farmers and lumberjacks who were poor and lived in trailers, and

farther down a Mennonite settlement. They didn't have much to say to us. The house I lived in, built by the Mennonites, was set against a pine forest and a tiny branch of Barne's Creek. It was simple, like a Preacher's house — a sad place, colorless, dark, full of unmarked days — not melancholy, not black or white or grey; the days rolled by noiselessly, with no discernible quality. It was the melting of definition, the ability to define. Burning from an early age, it flattened me, pulled everything apart.

My parents were many times faded, like old photo plates on silver glass. I, as much raised by the span of days than by a human hand, would stand out there in the heat of it, maybe five or more dogs from the yard would follow me out, to the shade of the trees, to float in a muddy pond, to lie in the weeds. My refuge was the wilderness. No harm could come to one there, that couldn't be easily avoided. The quiet in a field of weeds — sweet and safe, always safe. There was no contradiction of soft man to hard environment, nothing of man but things left behind, and barbed wire.

Enormous, dark, haunting, beckoning, the trees had a long span between them, the ground covered with straw. They led forever out to the horizon in orderly rows, to the west to old railroad tracks and field after field of weeds, or east to an abandoned logging road. You could just make

out the imprint of those who'd gone before — twin trails of stinking mud, with mud holes full of tadpoles, frogs, crawfish, waterbugs, spiders, and other friends.

The road was held back by an old barbed-wire fence grown into a thick wall of myrtle and briars, laced with old spider webs; a deep hardwood forest on the other side. I eventually bothered my way through. There was a marked change in the air, in seriousness. I crossed back and forth several times before I had the nerve to go farther. It was tough to penetrate the underbrush: the sinewy limbs were unbreakable, often barbed or bristling with thorns, with blackberry vines wound tight between them. I stamped down the shoulder-high stickers with plain-old shoes, like a deer trail.

Large vines hung down from the pin oak and cypress. Dry and lifeless, they'd break off in your hand. The creek hardly moved; its dark brown, oily surface mirrored the canopy. The darkness and play of light was dazzling, overwhelming. I can't explain how it gets under your skin. Few living things broke the surface. A water moccasin would poke his head out, or a mean-looking snapping turtle. There were more strange insects than can be imagined, bastards of evolution, thriving in the dim habitat. The earth was black, the leaves on the ground molding, damp, shot through with strange roots that flashed

sparks and glowed in the dark. Large mushrooms of every size pushed through the forest floor. The leaves gave out to felt-like lichen, moss, ferns and the rare bell-shaped flower, nearly always sick, bent over and faded.

I followed the creek to avoid getting lost. *It* was lost, curling back on itself to form islands, branching off in fork after fork. They all received names in turn; a map was slowly drawn as I ventured farther and farther away — to the limit of daylight and memory. When I tired of this I made caves, or else holes in the ground, log cabins, tree houses, fire pits. I walked the fields, pranced around naked, crawled in the mud. I felt a great kinship with the trees and stray cows, the deadly copperhead always coiled neatly, the circling buzzards and hawks and singing frogs.

I walked to the end of endurance, fell to the cold, damp earth, the sweet grass with giant clouds overhead, the sound of the wind. The stimulus reduced to its simplest elements, and repeated forcefully, the few animals that passed through had a palpable presence, something like a conversation. The crow was a great friend and constant source of amusement. Many hours were shared with them, at times almost hallucinatory, where there would be some important movement or gesture, as if in a dream. The appearance of a crow had a great significance and particular meaning — so the field becomes the dream, the line be-

tween sleep and wakefulness lost.

> *"...the playful paw-strokes of the wilderness, the preliminary trifling before the more serious onslaught which came in due course."*
>
> *Joseph Conrad (1857-1924)*

I walked to the edge of a field and lay in a ditch, looking up through the giant crabgrass — a field of V-signs on stalks. A flying bug with bulging eyes lit nearby. The wind had him tossing up and down, but he kept staring. You can't stay in a ditch too long, always something coming along to get at you.

There were moments here — fragments only — where the inner workings of the universe were revealed. Peering between the blades of grass into the birth of the cosmos, the elements moved in dazzling patterns, more and more dense as the heat increased. *Why this eternal movement toward greater complexity?* Eventually the first organism was spawned, and a mutation, competition for the food source — responsible for every A student, every home-leaving, every late night rambling on for fear of stopping.

I stood and struggled to get my bearings. All I could see down the other side was a line of trees buried in underbrush. The light faltering, I stood still for a moment and plunged across the overgrown field.

The light fell before I made it to the forest, what I wanted. I scrambled into the trees hunched over like a hominid, loping nearly sideways, stopping dead still now and then, for effect. The blood coursed in my ears, whapping and waffling, driving the lustful piercing through haggard limbs and moss and God knows what. The slanting rays of the moon cut each scene equally into life and death. As each was met there was a new life within, a brilliant vision of ektachrome, or a terrifying launch from the shadows.

I fell into a stand of Beech trees nearly golden in the moonlight and froze in place. It was so overwhelming that it fused the headlong caterwauling, before and after. Rapture, the flimsy thoughts I had washed away. I was afraid to move, that it would vanish, but eventually it dulled on its own. The Absolute isn't something easily grasped.

A wonderful new doubt began to surface, but here there was a flaw in my reasoning: I determined that an institution or relationship of any kind would be ultimately unfulfilling, so I refuted them — *all of them*. To be limited to a dull pattern of days was unthinkable. I returned to the forest, the only place available to me — the silence, the holiness — beyond comprehension, and so limitless. Vibrant, benign, the feel of ten thousand trees thriving in the subtropical heat. You could almost hear them, ancient

things carried on the wind, but what of civilization, humanity? I felt around for something of meaning; a state of near panic, and no clear way out. I came up empty handed again and again. I wandered the fields for months, plodding on tirelessly — the only possible movement.

> *"When I see you, why do I want to write my will?"*
> *Inscription to the Sea, Park Tu Jin (1916-1998)*

As I grew older the stifling conditions became unbearable — emotions too thick, woolen, suffocating. A great chasm opened that I could never paper over, no matter how many lives. I trudged through hollow days of despair with no hope, and no prospects. I was as poor as a man can be, dull from the failures of mine and others, the innate loss, the bleak outlook, with no hope for anything good to come of it… yet I sensed something monumental ahead.

I was so near breaching the wall, or leaping from it, that it happened of its own, without any understanding on my part. In this desperate state — a pattern that was to reoccur again and again: the sudden collapse, the breakdown — I finally reached bottom, the point where matter is transmuted back into energy, where they coexist, each becoming the other. The heavens roared to life and my

pitiful soul caught fire, and that was the end of it.

All I could do was cover myself in straw and sink into the earth. It was the final movement left me, and a fatal one. To let the knees buckle, even today I can hardly keep from falling to the ground. The damp seeped through my clothes. The smell of the earth, of pine and peat, the tiny rustling sounds of straw and insects, the sun streaming through the canopy above — it all glowed with the light of the Absolute. I could've remained there to the end, but to exist at such a base level, to remain there steadfast, strikes a certain chord that resonates through the plasma — things began to behave differently.

What occurred on the forest floor was only a precursor, the shockwave felt before the blast. My focus began to change from a dull outward view to the profound excitement of the path. This new fire in me healed the fissures, fractures, and since the path revealed itself to me in such a primal way, it was imperturbable and constant, prevented me from forming a new life of the same dull fabric, for the teaching found a way through on its own and, like a whistling arrow, to the bone.

THE FIRST MOVEMENT ON THE STAGE OF ANY REAL MEANING

THE HOMELEAVING

IS AN IMPORTANT BREAK FROM THE NEST
THE INDIVIDUAL MUST BE IN THE FLOW OF LIFE
CAPABLE OF MAKING IT IN THE WORLD
BEFORE HE/SHE CAN GO ABOUT DISMANTLING THE PSYCHE
THERE HAS TO BE ALL OF THE ELEMENTS
FOR THE THING TO WORK
THE HEART, THE GROUND, THE OCCUPATION
IF THERE IS NO SUFFERING, THE PRACTICE HAS NO FUEL
AND IN ORDER FOR THE SPIRIT TO BE INFLAMED
THE WHOLE LIFE MUST CATCH ALIGHT
FOR THOSE WHO STRUGGLE TOO MUCH
WITH THE CONDITIONS OF LIFE, THE OPPORTUNITY IS LOST
TO REVENGE AND REBELLION
AND THE WHOLE OF SOCIETY MUST BEAR THE RESULT
THOSE WHO REMAIN ON THE SURFACE
WITH NOTHING DRIVING THEM
WHAT DEPTHS ARE THEY CAPABLE OF?
HUMAN LIFE, FOR ALL ITS GIFTS, IS A VEXING PROBLEM OVERALL
HOW MANY LIVES ARE SPENT FOLLOWING USELESS THINGS
OF NO BENEFIT TO ONESELF OR SOCIETY?
YET WHEN THE INNER QUESTION IS ALLOWED TO DOMINATE
THERE IS THE INEVITABLE REALIZATION
OF THE INTERCONNECTEDNESS
OF ALL THINGS, AND THE CHERISHING OF ALL LIFE
HERE IS THE END OF THE BARBARISM FROM WHICH WE SPRANG
RIGHT UNDER OUR NOSES!

two. THE CALL TO PRACTICE

The event on the forest floor was the first inkling I had that I didn't have to run the program of a poor kid from the South. Instead of following blindly what I was born into, I decided to investigate it as if I were an *outsider*. From this position I naturally began to free myself from the conditions I suffered. It was only a matter of time before this led to the practice of meditation. In the span of a few years I went through many different practice forms until I found the one that resonated with me. It was the simplest, yet most profound, in my opinion — the path of Zen.

Here there were many influences, a multitude of programs I was to run, many teaching devices I was expected to follow. How to proceed? A common phrase from the

new strain of Korean Zen is to attain the state "before thinking." There are scores of people searching for this, to no avail! There's nothing in the realm of thought that can be fastened to, yet it seems to imply that there's solid ground just ahead. Not only that, everyone who hears it repeats it back to the uninformed as if it were the thing itself. Not grasping the heart of it, their words ring false, so they become more animated and forceful in their exertions. This sort of activity is to be expected. The primordial aspect, the thing that we are, this whole matter of existence, is always there, blasting through every channel of perception, yet we cannot sense it, remain blind to it. It's as if the everyday world is a virtual shell in the field of the Absolute, where every attempt at observation only reflects the world inside. Any amount of logic or reason is fundamentally flawed as it doesn't take into account what the Absolute realm entails. If you know what I'm talking about, how would you describe it, the eternal aspect of it?

Before you understand it, the teaching phrase is seen as an important clue to understanding mind. Once you've apprehended it, you realize how far from truth the teachings are, how perilous — that the Absolute must exist, yes, before thought, but after, as well as concurrent with it! As you can readily see, any analogy is far from the truth.

"Followers of the Way, get hold of this thing and use it, but don't fix a label on it. This is what I call the dark meaning."
Rinzai (?-866)

On my own, I began a tight regimen of meditation. When I landed my first real job, a night-shift board operator for a classic rock station, I adapted it to the environment, gradually extending the schedule to a full nightly program. For the first few years I only had to plug tapes into a cart machine and do the practice. I was usually alone, except for the transmitter, a 4000 watt coil mounted to the floor outside the studio. In fact, you had to step around it to exit the door. It stood floor to ceiling, pre-90's technology that crackled and hummed inside its metal skin, a mangled signal spitting out every telephone, clock radio, wall plug. It spoke to me over many long nights, the whine of classic rock seeping deep into my bones, what was not already blasted to the heavens. The nights continued to sparkle in subtle ways. Nothing like what occurred on the forest floor but the flames still consumed me in beautiful arcs that only inflamed my love agony and pushed me interminably. Endless long nights under halogen spots, they awakened some primal gateway as old as life.

One night I pushed the captain's chair from the console to the heat of the equipment rack. The light over-

head drilling into me, the transmitter crackling through the air, I slipped into a deep state and back out. A natural rhythm developed on its own. Like the needle of a compass again and again I faced the rapture — a humming sound, a flicker of light and heat, sudden breath in my lungs, the light overhead foreign, my surroundings unknown.

Suddenly my eyes opened, my lungs filled, but there was no form, no sound, only the space between things, the light and dark obliterated, white hot, pulsing life — a continuous field. I could not break free of it, for an unknown span of time. As I struggled with it, to remain immersed in a state of primordial bliss, suddenly the fiery door closed, my vision returned, and I was freed.

It was a magical time but my incubus held no challenges, offered no cure for the turmoil inside me. I began to long for a community of practitioners, a master. There were a number of Zen lineages taking root in America, but as I went down the list all the founders had already passed on — except one.

I tracked down a group of his in Arkansas, sixteen hours north. Rhoda, the visiting teacher, held the room captive with a crazy, reckless energy, the same I'd discovered on the forest floor. She had a great command of her senses, a great aura about her. There was the poetry and eloquence of a master, a fire in her breast combined with a gnawing canker visible to

anyone, some oblique childhood trouble carried through to the adult world, never resolved. How many broken things in this world?

> *"The difference between a barbarian and a man of culture grows less and less."*
>
> *Henry Miller (1891-1980)*

She towered over us like a bishop at a small church, holding a lacquered stick she used to point at things or bang on the floor, for dramatic effect. As she passed close to me her enormous sleeves, like wings, brushed my face. I secretly touched the hem. She caught me, my peasant grasping for holy signs, and looked away.

I stayed to the back, absorbing all the things that can't be conveyed otherwise. When the bell rang for interviews everyone tensed. It went down the line, everyone getting a few moments alone with her in the lion's den. I remember clearly the first encounter. I stared intently at the window over her head in an abortive attempt to draw out an answer. She grew impatient and raised her tree branch, and struck me on the knee.

"It's not that far away. Stay in the room with me."

She was attempting to teach a basic course of koan study: unsolvable questions posed to knock the legs out from under a student, to cause a breakdown in the logical process.

"Do you see this telephone?"

"Yes."

"If you call it a telephone, I'll say that you're attached to name and form. If you say it's nothing, I'll say you're attached to emptiness. Not attaching to form or emptiness, what is it?"

I stared through the window again, struggling to come out with something. She glowered at me.

"OK, you ask me."

"What?"

"Ask me, I'll answer it for you."

"OK, what is it?"

She grabbed the receiver and put it to her ear.

"Hello?"

Sent back to the floor, I sat through endless rounds broken only by brief periods of walking — to move the blood through the legs. Tightly controlled meals were an extension of the sitting period, every movement carefully orchestrated. To put the mind in such a confined state, that it can't budge! The schedule was relentless, the breaks between practice rounds minute, and no privacy, no distractions, no escape. The pressure was enormous, the pain of sitting on the floor often overwhelming. I fought against the current, had a nose-bleed, heat flashes, nausea, headaches, intense pain in the knees and lower back. My

thoughts ran rampant, easily overwhelming me and my foolish attempts to calm them.

The intensity was tempered by her calm presence. She magnetized the room. Since we remained in looming silence her personality drove the mandala, her disciplined approach showing in every face. The koan interviews undermined our self-confidence, more perplexing than the most ornate philosophy, nearly alive with propagating the organics for deep insight. It was over far too soon. She had her bags packed and was already standing by the curb.

“I need to talk to you.”

“I’ve got a ton of things to do. Is it important?”

“I’ve been thinking about residential training at a Zen center.”

“…it’s not easy… but if that’s what you want…”

“Do you recommend the one in Providence?”

“There are lots of Zen centers in the US. Maybe you can find something closer to you?”

She turned to the street, impatient. Her head shook slightly, displeased with something beyond my eager heart, an authoritative presence with no moment of tenderness.

As tough as the retreat was, I loathed returning to the lonely control room, to an incremental practice that would prove untenable.

There was something intangible, something gained. I'd fall asleep and wake suddenly, deep in a meditative state, blind to the outside world, surrounded by intense heat and light. I began fasting every month, daily meditation for hours at a time. I threw everything to the flames. The flames grew higher, rosier, convincing me to go farther still. I spent a lot of time looking at things in minute detail. The mood I was in, like a gathering storm, had me running wild through the trees, thrilled and alive. I'd blasted onto the airwaves as a live deejay by then, but it was all too compelling.

"I've saved enough for the move north. I'm giving you my two week notice."

"Are you crazy? Do you know what you could do with a talent like yours? I was going to move you to the morning drive."

"I'll keep in touch with you, in case things turn around."

"You're serious…"

I didn't care the least about the glamour, much less for the pittance we were paid. I enjoyed the taste of fame, I still do when I think about it, but I needed a more progressive environment. The magic power of making such a decision lifted me farther from the dull fabric. It was a defining moment that shines in memory, more beautifully than any other.

I packed the old 4-door Mercury, a hand-me-down, with everything I owned. Country road hardly wide enough for two cars, long stretches hemmed in with row after row of pulpwood… my first heatstroke, heat rash, jungle rot… the humidity near 100 for months at a time; the driving rain that pulls the sky down, black as night; the quick darkening blotting out every emotion, a fusion of heaven and earth — a quickening, a static charge so powerful as to render one unconscious. Nothing as deep, as obliterating.

I headed north on the I-20. The rows of pine gave way to hardwood forests, to the rich green fields and rolling hills of Mississippi. These continued to spasm and rise, more and more broken apart with slabs of granite and basalt forcing their way through. Eventually the ceiling fell and in the indefinable mist the Appalachian Mountains took form.

I'd never been half as far from home. Though numb from tedium and exhaustion, I was greatly moved by the scenes I traveled through. The land gradually fell toward a stony expanse of foothills, the forest surprisingly full and largely familiar. I looked at a thousand cows, watched how the trees set in what particular place. It took a number of days to whistle past every abandoned field, every hokey road sign, mailbox… I recorded it all, and quickly forgot.

The Zen Center was fairly large, on the outskirts of Providence, Rhode Island. It was the head temple of the line, and housed the only teacher I knew, or so I thought. When I arrived I was nearly unable to speak. The secretary had pity on me, and showed me to a room.

SEASON TWO

THE FORMAL ASPECT

ZEN MASTER SEUNG SAHN HELD “TOGETHER ACTION”
ABOVE ALL ELSE
AS THE MJÖLLNIR OF PRACTICE LIFE
THERE ARE FEW GREAT MASTERS ALIVE TODAY
THE HIGHLY ENLIGHTENED MASTER OF THE WEST
HAS YET TO EMERGE
THOUGH OF COURSE THE OPPORTUNITY IS THERE
THE PRACTICE FORM, THE INFRASTRUCTURE, THE COMMUNITY
IS A WONDERFUL RESOURCE TO DRAW FROM
AND THERE’S NO SHORTAGE OF ZEN MASTERS
HAVING SEEN A REAL PATRIARCH
I WOULD HESITATE TO CALL THEM “MASTERS”
BUT A CENTRAL FIGURE TO DRIVE THE MANDALA
IF THE VOICE IS NOT EARTHSHAKING IN ITS CLARITY AND TRUTH
WHAT OF IT? TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THEM
DON’T WASTE TIME SOUNDING OUT THE FLAWS
FOR ALL OF US ARE IN SOME WAY BROKEN
THE POINT OF PRACTICE
IS NOT TO DWELL ON THIS
NOT ON ANYTHING, BUT TO REVEAL THE SUBTLE GROUND
IF YOU CAN’T SIT FOR MONTHS ON END
IF YOU ARE STILL LONELY OR IN NEED OF SOMETHING
BEYOND THE NATURAL FLOW OF THINGS
THEN A FREE LIFE MUST BE CAREFULLY TENDED, NURTURED
THE BRAIN MUST LEARN A NEW INTERFACE
NEW SYNAPSES GROWN
HOW THIS WILL OCCUR IS FOR YOU ALONE TO REVEAL

three. **OPEN SEASON**

The Zen center, a secret place unknown to the world, was a sprawling old building surrounded by fifty acres of trees. There were two enormous wings, at least forty rooms in all, with two large dharma rooms and long, drafty chambers and passageways leading past room after room. The bottom floor led to a basement with a dirt floor, lit by bare bulbs hanging from the rafters. It was large enough that you could always find a quiet room, or move from hall to hall if nothing else. It was damned nice.

I spent everything I'd saved before finding work on an assembly line, painting costume jewelry. The days were full of the struggle to survive, each end firmly anchored in practice. It was a pattern I was to follow for many years,

until the practice became so enmeshed that my struggle to survive *was* the face of it.

My arrival was at an opportune moment, as Rhoda was exiting along with most of the residents, some sort of upheaval that left the grounds whimpering in quiet resignation — where a new flower could easily take root. Unfortunately the Patriarch who demanded the expulsion is no longer with us, instead a board of directors, so if the thing becomes caustic there's no master to show the sword of Damocles.

The teacher who ran the center was a brilliant man busy with raising a family and work. He gave koan interviews once a week. I spent several years with him grappling with impossible things. Since there was no one at the center full-time, a new teacher began the ascent, which amounted to a chameleon-like transformation from a friendly man of the house on through increasing stages of obstinacy, leading to a cleavage point between the ruling fascist and the poor peasants who toiled beneath him, down to the wandering gypsies, outsiders, visitors, sightseers. The polarization of those jousting for position planted the seeds of revolution, as they gained the underground society gained. There's a vibe that goes along with American Zen, a banal mixture of socialism and religiosity that's dangerously close to being elitist. I played both ends, but was too young to be

taken seriously, so it was to the dejected ones that I fell.

There was a lot there. The community of practitioners is something grand. I don't know if practice would exist at all without them. One of my favorites was a reverend from some high place who resigned to a quiet life of books and gazing seriously through thick glasses at whatever anyone said, giving us all an air of importance; there was an old gay nurse, a depressed shaman, a bodybuilder too aggressive for the cloth, a few East Europeans with their great sense of the existential, college kids studying eastern philosophy, and even a few children. We would assemble in the kitchen or TV room at odd hours, laughing and sharing stories, books, chocolate — always a gift, a kind word — until the Abbot would give us a chore, or the eternal call to practice.

It began every morning at 4:30AM when a bell was rung down all the halls. We had a few minutes to put on a short robe and gather in the dharma room for prostrations, a common practice for lay sangha in Korea: from a standing position the knees are set on the mat and the torso brought down until the forehead touches, 108 times. The room let out for a short break afterward, then a few rounds of sutra chanting and meditation. We took turns cooking breakfast and washing dishes. There was always a hot meal and a warm group of friends. We sat in a ring

around the tatami and held hands before beginning, probably something passed down from the communes. The evening practice began at 6:30 with more rounds of sutra chanting and meditation. There were longer sitting periods once a week, and 3 or 7-day retreats every month.

I went between this and the jewelry factory for a few years until, threatened by constant repairs on the old car, the job was finally lost. An old monk from India gave me one of his, hardly better than the one I'd just hauled off.

"The mechanic told me it was a hazard to put on the road, but if you think you can fix it…"

All of the turmoil and beauty there made for a very full life. Always in a state of flux! If you clung to any of it, you were lost. To find harmony the mind can't move at all, the same as in meditation, but who can do this? Long after I reached a point where there was no more conflict, but all that occurred at that time was a struggle to get past, and the struggle only increased. To survive the winter I painted a house for a friend in Jamestown. It was made of rough wood clapboard, so the paint had to be brushed on by hand. The only good thing was the long drive down a lonely stretch of interstate that cut through the southern forests. On the last night I raced home at 2AM, money in hand, when a steady tapping under the hood rose to a loud knock…

KBLAM!

The engine beat its last few strokes at minus fourteen degrees. The wind outside, a strong howl, cut above the clatter. There was no other sound.

I nursed the car forward, nearly crawling to a stop before I saw an exit for a Park & Ride in the middle of nowhere. If I hadn't coasted around that last turn of the road, with the wind behind me! The car squeaked to a dead halt right in a parking spot. Frozen inside, with only light clothes and some old newspapers, I survived by sitting on my hands and feet and screaming at the top of my lungs. Ice crystals formed on the windshield. I watched them grow as my mind slowed to a crawl, until I could only stare at the curious shapes like an ignorant worm. At daybreak I saw a payphone in the distance, clamped to one of the utility poles. I forced my feet back into stiff, frozen boots and limped to it. It was dead. I waited hours more for a bus to arrive, silently cursing.

When the snow finally melted the Zen center began constructing a 7-story pagoda for the Patriarch's 20th Anniversary. I walked out to the site and pitched in. After a few days I was allowed to pick up trash. In a few weeks I was moved to sorting out nails and recycling. It didn't matter what I was doing, I was glad to be part of it. Cold, crisp mornings with steam coming from the fields, ev-

erything covered in a thin frost. The sun burned through by noon. Filtered through our straw hats, the light fell softly on our work. It affected me; flames rose all around and danced with delight. There was no sorrow that could reach me those days. We kept on until the big bell tolled from the hillside — a signal that evening practice would soon begin.

Dominik worked late most nights, his torch blasting through holes in the walls and ceilings, repairing near constant plumbing leaks in the old section. He was a Polish monk with great, bushy eyebrows. Fresh from the perestroika battlegrounds, he'd spent years in prison for blowing up statues of Lenin. He'd detonate acetylene bombs on the grounds now and then, usually near the secretary's office. Half the fingers of one hand were missing from a "dummy" grenade, but he had tremendous skill with the rest of them.

I enjoyed his company, so often stayed up with him. We were always dirty, crawling around in some dark hole, the "temple rats." Over many long nights he taught me much about life and women, furnace lore, the thousand types of plaster, the history and manufacture of every chemical substance from linseed oil to ketamine, and a great deal about Zen.

More chemist than chef, he cooked incredible, inde-

finable things in the old world style: sourdough bread, fruit compotes, jellies, stews, and a wonderful baked pear that took three days in a wood-fired oven. The Canadian geese that came in the Fall would follow him around like little children, honking for one of his specialties. They returned every year like he was part of the family. He always encouraged the flock. The central figure in most of our lives, without being aware of it, he was just doing his thing.

There were many more great souls than I can record here, a considerable amount of socializing and wandering the halls; a great reward after all the hardships. It was the only period of my life I wouldn't mind repeating. It was an enormous step for me: life was more clearly oriented, the work meaningful. Of course I had no idea how much farther there was to go — so extraordinarily far! It was a beautiful period of study and absorbing the teachings. What was instilled was an economy of movement. Meditation wasn't something that only took place in the dharma room, but spanned the whole gamut.

The community life is a vanguard for practice, everything branching from it. The focus of the day, which still excites me, was to uncover the meaning of existence, to not stop there, not anywhere, but to continue asking — to reveal the mystery, the rapture, the raging current

unknown that encompasses all that we see, smell, taste, touch, all that we are. There was a place for it, and time to attune oneself — an ideal life in that respect.

Dominik and a few of the carpenters took the winter off to attend kyolche (lit. *tight dharma*), the long winter retreat on the hill. Why I chose to follow them is still a mystery. There must be some instinct in us, like the pull of gravity, for of all the different training forms, kyolche is the one with the thoroughness to transform. If daily practice is a small flame, kyolche is a furnace. It's easy enough to put your life on hold for an hour or two, but for ninety days? Things that weigh on you, things you aren't even conscious of, are gradually lifted, gone — it doesn't matter what you're made of.

I pleaded for a loan from the secretary, and turned one of those corners from which you can never turn back.

> *"…white clouds floating in the sky, clear water flowing down the mountain, the wind through the pagoda: I surrender my whole life to them."*
>
> *Zen Master Seung Sahn (1927-2004)*

It's impossible to gauge the first time entering the monastery. How to prepare for three months on the floor? Time flits away nervously as the day draws near, and then only hours, minutes…

It was a short walk from the Zen center, on a small rise above the pond. It overlooked fifty acres of trees, their bare black trunks a somber reminder… granite blocks strewn in the broken, frozen soil. The place was made for such things.

The dharma room had glass doors on three sides that opened to a wood deck high above the pond, with a blue tiled roof that curved upward at the eaves like a bird's wing. Beneath this floor a single hallway ran alongside five rooms, each with a small window and a closet. There was no furniture other than our bedrolls.

Everyone wore grey robes and socks, their eyes to the floor. A pillbox stuffed with cotton, the sound was reduced to the point that the heart became audible. The somber group sat in a large ring facing outward, their mats close together, nearly touching. Who knew what churned inside them, but outwardly it was striking to witness the discipline and order.

Silence. The silence was, at first, absolute. No loitering, no books to read, no media of any kind, no food other than the strictly orchestrated meals, no escape. A laboratory, everything removed so that the true self could be revealed. Nearly always enthralling, but to acclimate oneself to the schedule, to let go of the 10,000 things and perceive the floor, is very arduous.

The square foot of floor in front of the cushion is held in high regard, in fact, nothing outside of it is deemed important. The movement of the subconscious — *the movement of the crow from one field to the next* — imbues the floor with myriad images, to the point that it's easily lost. The struggle is to remain aware of it, to ceaselessly return to it, to simplify life to the point that it remains visible — until the mind is surmounted.

I took my seat and gazed into the pitch black glass doors and watched the world come alight. The day progressed steadily to its dim dusk and blackening, to the same mirrored glass as before the dawn. Time ceased to imprint itself, morning and night matched perfectly. The days fell in a shiftless pattern, a play of light on the floor as the shadows moved from one wall to the next…

"THWACK!"

A sharp crack across the shoulder blades! Awake!

It's easy to lose your place, to fall under the spell of a daydream and go under, and not far from this the unmarked door. It's one of the great impediments to practice, one that afflicts everyone. To help reach the resounding depths a sentry walks the floor with a thin wooden shaft nearly four feet long. He carries it upright as he paces the ranks, looking for the ones who nod off. These received a few sharp blows.

"The Buddhas and ancestral teachers have always gone into the boiling cauldron, into the coals of the furnace… I don't know whether you believe fully or no layman. If you say you possess a secret method not handed down from father to son, a subtle technique that doesn't use going into the boiling cauldron, into the coals of the furnace, then I hope you'll bestow it on me."

Ta Hui (1088-1163)

As the flames rose I choked on noxious fumes, in the grip of a heavy mood. Another of the serious impediments, dark things are often stirred from the depths as you delve deeper into the grey matter. I walked down to the pond, searching for a fault in the ice. As I came to the bottom of the hill I saw a small child sitting in the snow. So radiant! I walked over to him, worried that he'd been left unattended.

"Hey! Look what I'm doooing!"

Fooling around with a toy shovel, he was making snow castles. I knelt beside him quietly. Such a pure, beautiful mind, to witness it was enough to drive away the demons. Children always do this for me.

The day dragged on. The practice continued in a steady drone that flattened everything. The ceaseless discipline forced the mind from its kingdom, to crawl around on its hands and knees searching for the merest crumb. It's

often amusing to take apart the mechanism and watch it flail about — after all the suffering.

"Exactly what's the point, old friend? Shall I proceed?"

"Oh… please no! I would like to speak inanely for an hour or two. What could be the harm?"

I came apart in the slow movement between sloth and torpor and my youthful torrent of emotion. It took many kyolches before I could sit well, but in a very long, organic process my mind became still.

When I returned to the Zen center I wasn't the same man. A great amount of weight was lifted from me. It changed the order of things, the point of faith, as there was no more need of it. I could clearly see the work ahead — what was required for me to be free of the chain of human concerns, what course my life would take. Life was at once a great deal more enjoyable, more radiant, of greater depth and simplicity. I was exhilarated, and continue to be so, from the release of my burdens.

Why is the mind attracted to things that hinder it? Why do we allow heavy things to dominate our subconscious? Are we so primitive? I went alone to the forest behind the center and kneeled in the slender grass, my head to the ground.

With the pagoda finished, and no car, my prospects for work were grim. Fortunately Ben, the old housemaster,

who'd kept his post for years, decided to move on. I became the new housemaster, privileged to join the inner circle. As kyolche wreathed everyone in a holy light, the staff meeting was more the shitty light of a pine-knot fire circled by bugs. The stinky apes beat their chests and squabbled over ridiculous things I couldn't make out, their conclusions handed to me as if it were gold. It put me in a difficult position.

"Your turn to clean the bathrooms."

"Oh, gee, thanks."

But honestly, with such a mass of people going in and out, I stopped with the business of making friends. Don't get me wrong, I'm the friendliest man around, but I don't keep up with anyone — to work cleanly within the boundaries of emptiness to emptiness. If emotions are involved, the onslaught can be unbearable. There's always something beyond endurance: an insult, a threat, a click of the tongue. If there's no branding, then no possessiveness, when the new friend leaves, they're gone; when the new guest arrives, the new friend is born. What was introduced on the forest floor, and took shape in the monastery, became a way of life. The various aspects were forged together into something new. Instead of dealing with the self and its many requirements, more and more I was thrust onto a larger stage. Here the dream was made

real.

If you're able to collect your energy, to process, digest, assimilate the tide of thought and emotion, gradually you begin to build heat, and, as in the fusion of matter, there's a transmutation. But practice doesn't heat up without a structure to contain it: a daily schedule with meals, showers, group activities, long walks at night… maybe a decade or more… and a revolution, a thousand of them, before the practice is your own.

TO PURSUE THE DHARMA IS A DIFFICULT THING
AS THE MIND CANNOT KNOW ITSELF UNLESS SUBTLY
AND THROUGH THE IMPRESSIONS OF OTHERS
FOLLOWING YOUR OWN IDEA
THE MIND IS EASILY CORRUPTED
A PRACTICING COMMUNITY IS NO GUARANTEE
AGAINST FALLING INTO YET ANOTHER LEVEL OF EGOISM
THE PROCESS CAN BE TIRESOME
EVERYONE SEES EVERYTHING
BUT IF WE ARE TO TRULY GO BEYOND THE MIND
IT'S THE MOST EFFICIENT WAY, AND TIME IS SHORT!
CAMPING OUTSIDE THE INSTITUTION
WHAT I'VE RESORTED TO AT TIMES
DOESN'T EXCLUDE YOU FROM PRACTICING WITH THE SANGHA
SITTING LONG RETREATS, GOING IN FOR KOAN INTERVIEWS
IN FACT, THE COMMUNITY WILL ENJOY HAVING YOU
AS IT'S AN ECCENTRIC GROUP
IF THE TEACHER DOESN'T SUIT YOU
YOU AREN'T OBLIGED TO KOWTOW TO HIM/HER
OR WASTE TIME LISTENING TO THEIR DRONING LECTURES
IF THE GOAL IS TO ATTAIN THE ABSOLUTE
WHY OBLIGATE YOURSELF
TO FOLLOWING THE PROGRAM?
YOU CAN'T DO IT ALONE
NOR CAN YOU REMAIN ANCHORED
IN A BELIEF SYSTEM
IT'S TO A SERIES OF HOMELEAVINGS THAT WE ARE DESTINED

four. **VASHON**

The Patriarch noticed that the bellhouse had fallen into neglect. The kids from the school nearby were throwing rocks at it. He asked the Abbot to have us dismantle it and move it to a new location. Dominik — a man of the world with the wind in his teeth and a communist flag under his feet, a man who stood like a beacon for all oppressed people, had no skill of this sort. He hated hand tools, unless they were fashioned out of things found under the woodpile. He was adamant about this. I wasn't much better, but I had some facility with power tools, and all of my fingers. Dominik had the idea to carve our own nails out of wood, but fortunately there wasn't time. I rescued what I could from the basement. He went along with it as long as I did the actual work. He stayed with me through every turn of the screw

until we had it raised. We had a crane hoist the 2-ton bell down into the frame. As soon as we had the chain loose, he went back to the plumbing.

I finished the job on my own, with an old Rockwell saw with a hot-wired switch. You plugged it straight in and RAWWWWWWRR! …it was cutting before you could catch up to it.

Snow started falling as soon as I had enough planks down to collect it. I flew off the roof a dozen times, with that Rockwell spitting fire behind me. Damned lucky I survived. Somehow the pitch of the roof came out different than we planned, but it couldn't be helped. I'm sure if you protracted the angle of a man falling to his peril, it would take that shape.

The Patriarch was gone before the first nail. I had one interview. Alone with him for the first time, I was immediately in tears. "Your teaching has made a great impact on my life. I don't know how to thank you…" He was silent for a long moment. His face gave no sign.

"You've done a lot of practicing and your heart has opened up. That's wonderful."

Suddenly he grew fierce. I was struck by how much energy he pulled out of nowhere. He picked up a gnarled branch a foot and a half long, polished cherry sealed with lacquer, and hit me.

"Now it's time for you to do much hard practice, bring your energy down to your tanjin! (lit. *energy garden,* or *center*) OK!"

He wasn't concerned with my emotion, a hallmark of Zen, and a great stumbling block for most Westerners. In Zen emotions are put on the same level as thought: transitory, and so of little value. When traced back to their origin they prove empty of themselves. The emphasis is put elsewhere, toward the far more compelling, unifying ground of the Absolute.

> *"Rather than attaching yourself to my words, better calm down and seek nothing further."*
>
> *Rinzai (?-866)*

Soon after the Patriarch left, the Abbot followed, just as a volley of leaks appeared in a near daily assault. Pressed for time and sanity, Dominik made an executive decision. We cut the water, ripped out the old lines, and ran brand new copper to every floor. It was as if we'd waited for the Abbot to leave before making any changes, like a game of freeze. The secretary mulled this over for a moment, and cut us a check.

It's hard to explain what we were dealing with. The Abbot was impenetrable, indecipherable unless you knew

him. Before taking on the monk's occupation he lived in an abandoned house; a man fond of frugality, decay, of letting things remain as they were, as though abandoned — to molder in a quiet fume. His expression of the dharma was extremely tight, to a fault. It was only natural that there was a mutiny.

The copper cost a lot more than we thought. Though we recycled the old pipe, the secretary had to dip into the cash reserves. When the Abbot returned the ceiling was still down.

"Who gave you permission to do this?"

I'd just finished stoking the furnace. We were roasting up real nice and enjoying the quiet winter when he poked his head in the door.

"Sir?"

"What the hell are you doing? You're fired!"

Kyolche was only a few weeks away. Out of a job, no car; it pressed me again to the anvil — the purifying stage before entering the monastery. I had a feeling something was in the pipe, but what could possibly occur that would heat my life to the point of a break? What did I have that had not already been taken? I'd been nearly frozen to death, worked to the point of crossing over, fired, stranded with nowhere to go — I thought I'd reached stasis. A Lithuanian friend interceded:

"You have no idea what life can bring! You can never rest!"

The Abbot returned to Korea for the winter, his replacement a brilliant young laywoman from Cambridge. Her cheerful, bright mind set fire to the room. She laughed often, including everyone in a celebration of practice. The Abbot, militant by comparison, was lit by a cold fire from somewhere else.

Of course the forms were the same, but how much easier to connect the practice with a sense of wellbeing if you're not threatened with it! No need to raise the voice! To be in the presence of greatness is an encouragement of its own. It gives one hope and a sense of wonder. If the presentation is more corporate slogans and tired old teaching stories, what can come of it?

Watching the laywoman, her pauses held more conviction than most lengthy discourses. A vivid expression of dharma: what it looks like, how it reacts to the audience — absolutely no one was left out, or denied respectful consideration. She was the first to make me feel that I was on to something. She was a rock star, and, like a rock star, it all ended when the show was over. Darkness overtook me, everything up in flames — the old razzle-dazzle.

She spoke often of a 100-day solo retreat, by far the toughest of the training forms, attempted by few. It in-

trigued me. I found a hermitage on Vashon Island and saved everything I could for most of the following year. As I neared the end of my preparations Rhoda called.

"I want to talk to you. When can you come?"

She lived in a small, dark clapboard house near Brown University. I'd seen her only a handful of times in my years there. I was nervous about the meeting, as she was in some way royalty: the first contact I'd had with living, breathing Zen.

"Why don't you cut your hair? Are you selling drugs?"

"What are you talking about? I'm shaving my head for the solo retreat."

I never figured out what she was mad about. Maybe she didn't like the blue Mohawk, but that's hard for me to buy. There was some bad chemistry between us. I liked her, but as much as I liked her she despised me. That's a hard thing to take from a teacher. To add to it, she'd recently been appointed head of the school. There was no one who could salvage my Zen career. It ended there, with her.

Not done with me, she nearly pressed me to the wall with her hateful glare. I felt my way out the screen door backwards. Stumbling, I made my way out to the car.

"You know, I never did like you," she said curtly.

There was more, but the pinging 4-cylinder of my bor-

rowed car drowned her out. The meeting was a bomb with a slow fuse — I continue to reel from its impact. The force of it caused the path turn back on itself; a reoccurring theme. Although it was ultimately liberating, the door sealed behind me like old rattan — dusty, wordless, gone.

I hid my things, what I couldn't carry, in an old storage room and made my way to the bus terminal, that decrepit slice of the American soul, the timeless miasma of suffering. Like disturbing a rat's nest, I was afraid to breathe the air. A sickness hung over it as ominous as a terminal ward, with a feeling of despair so visceral it was hard to move the limbs. Every tone the color of sadness, dim, faded through the hands of millions down on their luck, their sweat acrid, their hot breath mixed with diesel exhaust. The human current wore through the walls, but why should something outlast us, other than to point at what remains beyond our trifling years? The machines were old, half-empty and half-working. The ticket agent's desk was sunk behind a laminated counter of an indecipherable pattern lost to wear and coffee stains, the plastic worn through to fiberboard and old green paint, everywhere faded, ugly, with some quality of despair beyond the color of the walls.

There were several on the floor for no reason. Dirty,

hollow, a poor lot of sad faces too far gone to sit in a chair — the ground would suffice! A worn look to everyone, a life-long wearing out that shows in the folds of skin, the set of the eyes, like a dog tethered too long. If society had some measure of compassion there would be a Mission next door. A hot meal and a room for the night would relieve so much from these forgotten souls in their travels from one misery to the next. It would be a blessing for them.

The schedule was missing half its letters, and more than three years behind. Lines were cancelled long before their numbers fell from the board as if the world had ceased turning. Lines changed, numbers changed and no one knew for sure which bus would be the right one.

I checked my suitcase and a 100-pound bag of rice — joining my friends on the floor. There was a long period of shuffling from one cramped cabin to the next, of staring at things without really seeing anything. I was in turmoil from all that had proceeded, excited to be going somewhere, and in some way dead. You have to reduce the level of hope to fall deep into a bus-trance.

Before I was through savoring my own miseries the city rolled into view, and then the port of Seattle. A short ferry ride and Vashon rose from the mist. It bristled with giant Douglas firs. Their magnetic power — more beauty than

can be felt or described — the impact of it alone calmed me. Practice is as pure and faultless as the wild, for me there is no difference.

My friend's house stood on a worn cliff near the shore. It was on a rise above the cabin, out of view. The whole area was hemmed in enormous blackberry vines as big as your arm. The cabin was tiny, as if made for a child. It stood at the foot of a bluff, one wall filled with a large window overlooking the ocean. There was hardly room to stretch out fully in one direction, and not enough in the other. A small marine fireplace, no bigger than a shoebox, adorned one wall. It was the only thing in the room.

I soon realized that I didn't have enough candles, but with hours of pitch black at each end of the day I'd need a suitcase full. I used the few I had to adjust to the light, soon forced to watch from my seat as the day faded to black. No holy light in the heart of darkness, but a blind dark stronghold until the faintest beginning of dawn, with the evening's return again to darkness.

At first I was afraid of enduring the months ahead. In all of my years growing up in the wilderness I'd never been outside the safety of the light. But after a few days I adapted. I let the sun rule me. I became acutely aware of the play of light. There was something more to the sunrise and the long hours of enveloping darkness. Since the

window was facing out to sea, there was not even the glow of the city, only faint starlight and the phases of the moon. It was catalyzing to feel the sun sink beneath the horizon, the magnetic pull of the moon.

I was on the floor sixteen hours a day, with few breaks. Rhoda thought the schedule too difficult, but she didn't know me. There's no hindrance, not even death, that can detain one in the fire of practice. It *was* the most difficult thing I've ever done. To sit through a day, from dusk to dawn, consumed me. 100 days of it is unapproachable, can't be seen through or described — it took everything I had, every bit of resolve to keep me on the seat, every round.

My mind, like a willful child, refused to be controlled, often dazzling with its confabulations — a long stream of thought with few breaks, a slideshow of scene after scene: song lyrics, jingles, childhood memories welling up and leaving everything heavy and fearful; shameful, humiliating, thoughts; all the things left undone. There was no end to it.

As fascinating as the swarm can be, the source is far more compelling, and more still its cessation, for there is the deepest intimacy. The flame of love is no different than this demand, this "storming the gates of heaven." But to bathe in the pure ethers requires a strenuous bear-

ing against, more like the front line of battle. Before any headway is made the landscape must be endured to the point that it becomes familiar, the groundwork laid for the next affront, the next precious few yards.

The battle isn't measured in a logical span of things, for the wall is breached suddenly and absolutely, and at once you're cast out. This movement back and forth *is* the landscape of the front. Beaten against the rocks, the ego is eventually abandoned — out of necessity. In the process the mind is purified, the sense of individuation lost. As the mind becomes more stable, concentrated, nature directs the flow more and more directly — although the whole gamut is under her control, of course.

After a few weeks I tired of the strong daylight and hung a blanket over the window. Shut in that cocoon, surrounded by thorns, autumn fell through in a heavy mist.

I wasn't alone. A small furry spider rode out the changing weather on a web near the ceiling. As the days progressed he made web after web, inching down the length of the wall with more and more erratic designs. There was a snake under the locust tree. He hardly moved as I bent to my tasks, but I moved carefully. There was a pump-handle nearby where I could draw water. I cooked a cup of rice every day on a small camp stove under the eaves. I didn't want or need more, thought little of it.

As the retreat became more focused, I was often captivated by ridiculously simple things, like the edge of the door or the shape of a stick. I was prone to ritualize things, to invoke the Gods from the vapors and beam at the ants, to commune with the beasts. A large doe would come to my window at night and stand for long moments. Attracted by my musk, she'd only come when I left a soiled article of clothing outside.

The weather turned cold and damp. The spider continued its slow work, more and more randomly, as there were no flies. It had a dozen webs by then, all of them empty. Finally I watched it fold its legs under and fall to the floor, a starved and shriveled husk.

"The light finally grows dim, the axis of the day declines."
Albert Camus (1913-1960)

As I fought to maintain the schedule I was often weighted down with a deep anguish, a near collapse at the foot of it. But there was something undefeatable, pristine, incorruptible, that shined with renewed vigor just as hope was lost. Practice encompasses more than we are capable of. Like Thor, who drank from Loki's horn that contained all the seas, here the sea is sentient life, the full universe — limitless energy and the ability to endure, to the end of

life — or the will is exhausted, the hands folded, and the drum of retreat.

My friend came down to check on me and give me some work.

"Could you cut down the blackberry vines during your work period? They're taking over the hill."

Though densely packed, their roots were shallow and far between, endangering the bluff. I used one of my two breaks, a full hour, to swing his dull machete. It stirred everything up, put a bit of violence into the day.

The rich smell of things freshly hewn; the stones and grainy soil of Vashon were slowly revealed under the choking vines in a sweltering rush of thorns and blood. My clothes were easily pierced, forcing me to plot out each movement. No matter how careful I carried them into the cabin. They clung to every scrap of clothing, worried me in socks and underwear, but it didn't concern me. The practice drowned out everything. Such an arduous struggle!

Bone pains and all day sore, the rapture burned through, rendered the fat, turned the skin translucent… the light poured out everywhere. The gestures and movements of the earth were as my own. The body lost form, composure, was transmuted into something of no mass, acutely aware of the slightest movement or noise. There were many mo-

ments where I thought I would lift from the earth.

Impossible to reveal anything tangible, the mouth freezes at such depths. There was only the steady onslaught, an ever widening view pounded flat under the weight of it, such a long stare into the origin of things, so thorough, that the soul was lost.

Near the end of my sack of rice there was a knock on the door.

"Yes?"

"It's your last day. Do you want to come up to the house?"

I had no idea! "I should stay. I want to finish."

My friend nodded, "Tomorrow's Thanksgiving. We're having a lot of people over. Come up and join us."

That last night flew out of my hands. I felt there was no other world than the small cabin, the constant rounds of meditation. The morning came. I climbed the hill and walked into the bright kitchen with wonderful, radiant souls and the rich smells of cakes and pies and an enormous turkey. It was remarkable, to step out of a highly focused, solitary environment into a full house, the ease of it. To look at ordinary things with those eyes! Everything had a peculiar shine, at the same time familiar. All sorts of subtle information was revealed: the uncomfortableness; the conversations they'd had to work out my strange presence, the questions they'd prepared ahead of time,

the boys urgent desire for me to see what he got for his birthday, and the neighbor's complaint that I was stealing apples from his tree.

THERE WAS A LIMIT TO WHAT I WOULD ENDURE
FOR MY OWN PRACTICE
MY OWN RELATION TO THE COSMOS
THERE WAS NO REASON TO STAY WITH THE LINEAGE
YET IT WAS SOMETHING LEGENDARY
HOW COULD I FAIL THE ANCESTORS?
EVEN THEN I KNEW IT WAS TIME FOR ANOTHER HOMELEAVING
AND THE INEVITABLE SEARCH FOR A PARTNER
IT'S ABSURD TO SAY THIS
YET BUDDHISM IS A MONASTIC TRADITION
HOW IT WILL ADAPT TO THE WEST
IS ONLY NOW BEGINNING TO UNFOLD
OUR CULTURES COULDN'T BE MORE DIFFERENT
I CAN SEE WHERE TRAINING
FAR REMOVED FROM THE TORMENT
OF THE OPPOSITE SEX
WOULD LEAD TO A MORE CONCENTRATED ENVIRONMENT
BUT IT ISN'T REALISTIC IN OUR SOCIETY
NOR CAN WE SUPPORT MONASTIC COMMUNITIES
THERE MUST BE A WAY TO DEVELOP A DEEP PRACTICE
WITHOUT SHUTTING OUT ANYTHING
HAVING SAID THAT, PAST A CERTAIN POINT
RELATIONSHIPS ARE UNNECESSARY
AS THE MIND CHANGES
THE EMOTION CHANGES
AND THERE IS NO MORE NEED OF THESE THINGS

five. **STELLA**

I took the ferry to Seattle, drifting from one sweatbox to the next. The lines of cafes, bookstores, eccentric shops — strongly influenced by the music and drug scene — gave the street a strange power. It had the feel of a dank, junky basement with blinking beer lights, the cackle and scratch of excited humans holding to the rails in close knots. The light, half-strength, dissolute through the steady rain, illumed a town slowly sinking in mud. Gutters shot out volleys from every corner, racing French drains surged; the rain constant but light, the light poles drooping overhead, their light diffused in the mist, everything glowed with a strange aura.

The two major streams that ran through my life, the spiritual and the worldly — one influencing the other, allowing each other to exist and threatening to destroy

the whole — ran together in one great mass. Everything began to beat with a new resonance. My life became its own teaching that, in the end, was better than any path I could've chosen. It was beyond my understanding then, but instinctively I knew what was occurring. I stayed for a few weeks mulling over things, but couldn't keep away from Providence. All of my things were there, my life sealed in cardboard boxes hidden in a dusty old room of the barn. More importantly, kyolche was to begin in a few weeks.

The Zen center was nearly deserted. The Abbot was away, again. Kyolche was run by a novice teacher, one of many who flooded the school after the Patriarch retired. To survive her and her socialist agenda: her interrogations, accusations of wrongdoing — a prison camp atmosphere, some of us were meeting in a small loft above the barn, a half-mile down the hill.

The loft was musty, crumbling, lit by broken, filthy windows that let through a steady cold blast. We dug out an old coffee pot and radio and gathered in the dim light, laughing and sharing our campfire stories, helping each other to cope with the school-teacher environment on the hill.

Stella sat across the room from me one day: a beautiful Italian with great, blue eyes. Straight backed, strong and

clear… we didn't speak, because of it I saw only the glimmer of the soul. I was enchanted. Her wonderful, clear gaze set fire to the room, all the more dramatic in the dim light. I left a note in her shoe.

"I see you've joined the resistance."

She'd recently returned from LA to start a new life on the East coast. Raised in Connecticut, emotionally repressed, there was a cold fire coming out of her.

"There's something you have to know about me. I'm bossy, but I have a good heart. Do you think you can handle it?"

With my limited experience, I had no way of making a sensible decision. The whole thing about infamy escaped me, that one can form an identity on bad behavior. If someone made a proposition like that to me now, I'd laugh in their face.

"Why… what do you have in mind?"

"Let's get an apartment together. What do you think, Seattle or NYC?"

"I was thinking about moving to Seattle."

We moved to Manhattan. I welcomed the new challenge, but wasn't prepared for the mad pace. I couldn't tune out the volume, the turmoil. Eaten alive, my peculiar soul observed its own struggle with amusement.

"Look at the poor bastard! He's really getting it now!"

I found work with an old Irish contractor, who'd call every few days to send me to a new job. I did everything wrong. I had absolutely no training, so was getting by on brute instinct and flim-flammery. The boss had no idea, as he'd only show when it was time to collect the bill. I did what I could, hefted the heavy tools alone on subways, buses, taxis… I'd walk until I'd lose my grip, rest my arms, and continue on, slowly exploring the city — the bristling crowds, the long desolate shafts of light. The heavy tools forced me to toughen up. Full of adrenaline, I often felt like shouldering through the walls.

We got a sublet near St. Marks. The window looked over a long row of Indian restaurants. Sitar and tabla players lined the streets along with a bizarre clan of homeless, miscreants, vagrants, pig fuckers, half-naked freaks… some of them would gather in front of the apartment at 3AM and spread their wares, a foul-smelling thrift market of trash.

I fell in love with the city, but Stella was overwhelming in the tiny apartment. We fascinated each other, but what use? I had no feel for relationships, something she found exasperating. I wasn't made for it, too independent, too quiet. I'd made it through most of my 20's without any contact with the opposite sex. It began to wear on me. Women became more heavenly than they deserved, used

the advantage to press me beneath their heels. It's hard to come from a position of having nothing, of being nobody. It never worked out for me. After the years of abstinence I had a few short affairs, mostly women from wealthy families looking for the oddity.

"The wolf-boy — look at him! He's so *uncivilized*…"

The affair with Stella was troubled from the beginning. It took great effort to weather her strong reactions against me. Too simple to see the machinery at work, I felt only the sting of the whip. She held me down with near constant retorts, the sort of struggle that often invigorates her type. Her impatience had me on a treadmill from the first day.

"Well? Do you love me or not?"

Using any litmus, she was a fine woman who only wanted to be adored, but she wasn't saintly or delicate or humorous or kind — a beautiful creature, but nearly all are. If there was something about her that would bring me to my knees it was kept from me, as punishment.

A cold snowflake fell on her face and melted in the heat. She was always hot. I'm sure her temperature was above normal. You could survive any blizzard with a couple of Italian women and a tin of sardines. I watched the steam rising from her neck.

"I want sex twice a day…"

"Does that include weekends?"

"…and no TV!"

"No TV?"

"You're not going to waste time with me. I want you to be productive."

The work wasn't to produce something of benefit to society, but that I adore her — and something to do with a unicorn I imagine, broken to pieces by whoever came before me. Why does a relationship so easily become a chore? It wasn't the discipline that put me off; it was her requirement that I feel more, that I express my feelings more, that I become a new male capable of feeling and expressing emotion unknown to my savage brothers. More importantly, that I listen to her emotive pleas, note the symbolic movements, intuit the influence of the weather, the play of light, the scrap of music in the air, the smell of rain. I must be intoxicated with her, think only of her… it required more than human abilities.

Is there a limit to the amount of emotion we can feel? If emotions are of such high value, would expressing them in large volume raise us aloft — like angels? Or is there some seediness to them, a vanity, gluttony?

I began pacing the streets, often riding the subway through the night — beautiful Mephistophelian nights never forgotten: the dangerous vaults and corridors of

near pitch black, crackling floodlights spitting arcs and haloes, stale vapors steaming from the manholes in toxic clouds; the air thick, raw saccharine; the strange whine coming from the park; the murmur and silences of endless street-level apartments spilling their contents out to the street. Not a moment without an angry voice in the ear, I paced the streets in a heightened state, stung by the perfect scenes.

All the soft places had burned off. I was a new alloy of unknown temper, unproven, too far removed from society to be reintegrated. It was largely my fault, what life had made of me. I felt that I wasn't fit to be in a relationship, a feeling that has come and gone, returned again, and now become a certainty. Eventually I was proven useless for her needs and shown the door.

Life in a Zen center is insular; the process of stripping down to the bare essentials doesn't leave a record society understands. It's impossible to get an apartment in Manhattan without a bank account.

"Hey Dad."

"Henry! What's going on?"

"Dad, I need a co-sign to get an apartment."

"*No*."

What could I do? I took the subway to Grand Central, watched the security guards hovering around the eleva-

tors. None approached me. The suits scurried around. Darkness. The filth was contagious. A homeless man held a station near the door until security pushed him out. He looked from head to head at all the businessmen who refused to cough up a quarter.

"Can't you see I'm hungry? Some of you look too fat."

The world was caving in, all of the animals feasting on the decay. Billboards of the most outrageous size and complexity flashed corporate propaganda. Giant screens showed broken movies of indecipherable meaning. I plowed through the yipping throngs to Canal and Broadway, down a sweatshop alley with steam vents and factory exhausts, and the few brave souls who wouldn't go around.

At Tompkins Square I stood for awhile in the soft enveloping darkness swarming with lovers and lonely souls. Though still barren from the winter, the spring madness had everyone out. The intense grey winter trees, haunting soulless grey — so striking! The hours, the scene constantly renewed, the fresh young faces turned inward. Tawdry messages flickered in the white heat, the black heat — part of me, something of me. I sat for an endless time listening to the noises of the city. The different environments fell against each other like cellophane, frame by frame. The images conjoined, the ceaseless activity of

meditation burned through with casual splendor. Night fell, the city glowered with its seductive graces, all the rough edges were soothed, smudged into black.

"The whole universe is yours."

Zen Master Seung Sahn (1927-2004)

To see through to the bottom, to discover your true nature is a revolution. No more the anguish of separation, loneliness, the plague of self-loathing so common to today's society. No more unquenchable desire, boredom, or need of the attention of others. No more poverty or lack, though if both the institution and relationship prove inadequate, incapable of providing either liberation or security, where do we turn?

There's something at play that goes from branch to branch, continuing unhindered through the chaos. It doesn't require a special situation. Once I got it into my blood that there was no safe nest, I began to understand what it was. Eventually I found a hole in Brooklyn with an old friend from the Zen center, a chronic depressive. Life was difficult for her, even normal things such as retrieving the mail, or going to the store. She'd wait for a time when no one was out, quite a feat if you ask me! She stayed glued to the desk at the window, looking out at the

clothes hanging on the myriad lines strung from building to building. I joined her many afternoons, staring from our poor surroundings down that picturesque old Brooklyn street.

I lost my job after half a year. The contractor stopped answering his phone. I had nothing saved and fell quickly. A desperate situation! Nearly starved, I received an intriguing phone call from the Abbot of a monastery in the Mojave Desert. A monk more or less independent from the school was building his own Zen monastery from an inheritance, and needed help getting the roof nailed down before the rainy season.

I said my goodbyes, shuffled the bags down the street, took the subway to Queens, to the Q33 to Laguardia. NYC underworld, cavernous through the plexiportal. Dark wormholes. Fluorescent mish-mash. Down and out.

IF NOT THE ZEN HALL
OR THE ARMS OF A LOVER
ARE WE REDUCED TO WANDERING THE EARTH LIKE PHANTOMS?
IF WE ARE TO GRASP THE FUNDAMENTAL
WE CAN NO LONGER ENTERTAIN
THE IDEA OF INDIVIDUATION
WE'RE GOING FAR BEYOND OUR BARBARIC PAST
INTO A STATE OF COMPLETE ENLIGHTENMENT
THERE ARE MANY WAYS TO STUDY THE DHARMA
AND PRECIOUS FEW AUTHENTIC TEACHERS
SO THE DRIVE MUST BE ENORMOUS
TO REMAIN STEADFAST
IF WE ARE BROUGHT TO THE POINT
OF CAMPING OUTSIDE THE INSTITUTION
AFTER ONLY A FEW GENERATIONS
THEN THE FUTURE REALLY DEPENDS
ON THE SPONTANEOUS BREAKTHROUGH
AS I'VE ATTEMPTED TO OUTLINE HERE
THERE'S NO SET PATH
I FOUND MYSELF FOLDED BACK INTO THE COMMUNITY
SEVERAL OF THEM
BEFORE I WAS MALLEABLE ENOUGH
TO BURN ON MY OWN
SO WHAT'S MAPPED OUT HERE
IS PROBABLY WHAT'S IN STORE FOR MANY OF YOU
IF SO, I CAN ALMOST GUARANTEE
THAT YOU WILL SOMEDAY JOIN
A REBEL FACTION AT A REMOTE LOCATION

six. **THE DESERT**

Los Angeles was hot, a grid of asphalt and concrete slung low to the ground; a suburban hell of beat up condos and apartments stretching beyond the horizon, teeming with illegal immigrants. The strong cast of the sun, the endless strip-malls, the grand old buildings slowly crumbling over the vermin below; here the beast was let loose, free to roam the wide streets, mirror of the soul.

An unbelievably slow journey across a sea of asphalt; LA's transit system is the worst I've seen. Multiple lines don't communicate or coordinate with each other so you have to go by the word on the street, and nobody rides the bus in LA. Stranded in full sun for an unmarked time waiting for the next lumbering beast to appear, when it did finally lunge to the stop I thought it was a mirage, so

went to the other side of the bench to get a good look at it before I trusted to board it.

At the station I found only one bus made the run to Mojave. The floor was crawling with trash. The usual drab faces and mistreated abdomens, everyone was tuned to their own channel, every color infused with grey. The air shone with CO_2, which feathered out to a dull sheen across the worn linoleum, clung to the ceiling vents and half-dead fluorescent displays, flattened under the grip of a billion soles, followed me in a seething boil as the bristling 5pm traffic swallowed us whole.

The bus was packed to bursting with foreigners, aliens, those out of work, out of luck. Aluminum carcass, morose, it lunged through a world that waited impatiently for it to pass, then forgot. Heaving against the dingy glass, LA reeled by in shades of grey, every bustling pedestrian, every storefront display cheapened by the patent blue fabric and industrial plastic.

We plowed through the chaparral, the air thick, raw saccharin. A stinky Asian woman beside me stewed in a yellow raincoat. Uncounted miles with her, we pulled into a fast food joint. I stepped under a shade tree as a billion tiny flies swarmed like a cloud from the sky. Everyone ran inside. What for? I pushed the pull-only door. A full room of cowboy hats greeted me. None of them held a

stare for more than half a second. My table was crammed in a dirty corner near the kitchen — plenty of noise to break through the twenty-atmosphere coming and going clouds, the kind of weather that always seems broken apart. The Mexican busboys glowered from the kitchen, but the waitress was so nice I felt like a little boy all alone in a sea of peach formica. I stayed at the table until I was fully stuffed. No money, and no sign of the Abbot. Outside the cowboys swarmed around a trash barrel under the fading pink sky. I cursed against the steady stream of 18-wheelers throttling down for the light. Trapped in a lousy restaurant in a lousy town, a long strip of gas stations, fast food joints; the wind constant, sand in the teeth. The night had already set when he showed — tempered, hurried. He said little as we screamed through the dark canyon. There was no need.

> *"…and the night sky above appears darker, more austere, and a hundred times more menacing…"*
>
> *Nikolai Gogol (1809-1852)*

At 4:30AM the familiar sound of the moktak (lit. *wooden bell*). Crackling fireplace, freeze-out morning — clothes worn to shreds, unwashed, the sky glowering with cold starlight, the air cold, clean. The days were long, from

sunup to sundown, and no breaks. There was something about it that appealed to me, something other than fighting the mounting bills in a shitty apartment in Brooklyn, but how many nights I dreamed of returning! Pacing, pacing back and forth — the crumbling desert, rocks strewn everywhere — it fit somehow, with my mood, what I struggled to digest.

Scrub oak and oozing pine trees stood out in the distance. A curiously green mineral colored cliff faces and dry riverbeds; a green mirrored in chaparral meadows of bracken. Wild sage, thick and plentiful, flourished on the lower slopes. Quiet except for strong, lashing gusts, the land was crumbling, crawling with lizards that clung upright to rocks, trees, barrels. The only other movement was the random eagle or raven, or a poor looking rabbit with a large white tail.

We rarely went outside, once every few weeks for the Sunday laundry run. The Abbot led a meditation group at a prison in Boron. He'd drop us off at a laundromat in Mojave and pick us up at the local restaurant. He was usually gone four or five hours at least.

Old and run down, the carpet was filthy, scattered with lint and old Spanish newspapers, razed by the trampling herds. We traded harsh glances over rows of machines. Friends were not easily made, you just did your business

and got the fuck out. The bathroom had a dirty, dripping sink. Reaching down to the plumbing underneath you could open a valve to the hot water. It was our chance to rinse off the layers of grime. No mirror, I shaved by peering into the doorknob. We were just scraping by, nearly tramps.

On one of the laundry runs Shorty came along. He was a Korean-American gang member from the LA battleground. A fugitive from a promised bullet and numerous warrants, he was loud, shining with an adolescent fury, as impeccable as any murderer who'd escaped justice. We got along because I was easy on him. I let him be himself, and had some advice ready for whenever his tiny world came to an obstacle.

He couldn't sit still for a damned second, so was out in the parking lot. I tended the laundry and kept an eye on the window. The light was fading fast. A couple of pudgy kids rode by on bicycles. I could hear Shorty all the way inside yelling at them.

"Look how fat you are! I bet you're on the way to eat something!"

I sat on the washing machine and took in the show. The kids beat it and it was quiet for a few moments. Shorty, the only sign of life in the ruptured lot, pranced around and stared off into the distance as the sun spat out.

Behind the laundromat a line of tattered old houses stretched back into the sand foothills like a desert ghetto. Nothing was solid, a half-hearted attempt to hold out. Their owners, a mangy, forgotten pack of citizens, faced the wind and the sun and drew a blank. I'd never paid much attention to them, always walked quickly past. It was a menacing area, an ugly scar on the valley, ridiculous against the vivid scenery.

The two boys came back leading a towering Mexican, who held one hand behind his back, clutching something small and dark. Petrified, I watched through the glass as more and more angry men piled out onto the asphalt lot. They pushed Shorty back against the curb. Cars pulled in, unloading more snickering beasts. They were nearly all shouting. The leader stood in front with legs widely spread. He poked at Shorty, who shrank to half his size, who was trembling as he braced for the rain of bullets.

I swung open the door and walked out among them, feeling that my life was surely over. I had no emotion. It was ludicrous — the pale horse. I strode into that fiery last moment as if I were already dead. Unaware that my legs were moving, I wormed in beside Shorty and the Mexican.

"Why are you laying trips on my brothers? We don't take that kind of shit around here!"

Choking on his own spit, Shorty moved his mouth luridly, wordlessly. I looked them in the eye but thought of nothing — nothing! Everyone grew silent. I put an arm around him.

"…I'm sorry. He's insane."

As they mulled this over, I pulled Shorty back into the laundromat. The sun was long gone. The pavement outside blended into the sky black. Hideous reflections from inside half obscured the view, but it was easy enough to see that the mob had not dispersed. Shorty found his voice again and began swearing. Having nothing else to do, I returned to the laundry. The Mexican came in with a few others, talking loudly and pointing at us from the other side of the machines. I continued folding clothes, only looking up when I heard the door.

Outside a few commands back and forth, unintelligible, frustrated shouting as the darkness fell. Impossible to see through the glass, though it heaved with the tumult of the crowd. With everything folded and put away, I hefted the duffel bag and we went out among them. Stupid to risk our lives so carelessly, yet I wanted it. I wanted more.

The lot was a desolate black hell. Long shadows fell from the faraway streetlight. With the desert wind against us, we walked quickly out into the open. Halfway through the maze our fate was revealed under Mike's blazing sign: a gleaming black and

white police car had parked near the door. By chance the pigs had pulled in to gorge, saving us from a cruel death. We entered the restaurant, grabbed a table, and ordered a stream of milkshakes and greasy food, keeping an eye to the door. Shorty made me promise not to mention anything to the police, or the Abbot. He was in enough trouble as it was.

We avoided the laundromat for a few weeks, but couldn't hold out forever. I finally said something about it to the Abbot. He shrugged his shoulders, and dropped us off the next Sunday, same as usual.

"There are no valid dharmas. Once you understand this, what use are such trifles to you?"

Huang Po (?-849)

The Mojave reached through the dust and turmoil and laid down a strong dose of its own teaching. It was an important return to the wilderness that renewed my bond and pulled me through the difficult times ahead. The days ignited. A small fire winked in the distance, a dull yellow, dirty, from a burned out furnace. The intermittent flashes spelled out my whole life. Only I could see it. What was this thing that struggled to exist?

I began writing. It was pulled out of me: the slave-camp atmosphere, the lack of money, of further progress; the conflagration of self and path and life, of finding mean-

ing. So many things were stirred in me I forgot what I was, and so surrendered to the forces at work.

Every few months we'd travel to LA and stay over at the temple there. It was an outpost itself, stranded on the bad side of Wilshire — a long expanse of swarming traffic, a horizon of dull smog and dull trees languishing in the gloom.

I walked through the front room with a friend on the way to the phone. The Patriarch sat on the couch, energetic and alert. He took a long look at us, his eyes sharp and fierce.

"Strong young men… you should be monks! Go to Korea and do the haengja *kyoruk*!"

We both froze in place. The man beside me spoke first. A rainbow-warrior, he'd only brushed the surface of Zen. A good fellow, but a very young student.

"I've thought about being a monk for a long time… but I can't do it now… I have to finish my studies at Columbia."

"I'll think about it," I replied, not really convinced I would. I'd never seriously considered it. I'm not the religious type, and that he didn't ask me directly. It made me feel like a Samuel Beckett nobody. But whether it was something personal or directed at everyone on the bus, I took it seriously. A saint of the highest caliber, I delighted

in any sort of contact with him. It was a miracle that he existed at all.

After he passed on I visited his room at the Korean monastery. They'd set up an altar with his funeral papers. As I neared the room a framed certificate caught my eye. He'd given me the dharma name *Man Hae* (lit. *Ocean of Buddhism*) years before. I asked him what it meant.

"An ocean of suffering."

I thought it poetic and dark and filed it away in the boxes of old things I pack around that can't be thrown out. Since we don't really use our dharma name in the States, I forgot about it. Fifteen years later, as I stood near the doorway to his room, Man Hae's portrait hung before me, along with his official handprint and stamp. He was a revolutionary and poet whose work was part of the school curriculum for all the children of Korea. I wouldn't have known it if I hadn't visited his room. It was the most he communicated with me, the symbol of the name, but I'm getting ahead of the story. Having him point in my general direction was something I turned over carefully through the long night. I had doubts about the life of a Zen monk, but saw it as an opportunity to continue the practice on new ground, so disregarded these. The fallout with Stella had me sure I'd never have a beautiful wife, or girlfriend of any consequence. I'd only begun writing experimental

pieces, mostly letters to friends. I never thought it would dominate me. There was nothing but the path and my fractured relationship with the school.

The indoctrination of a Zen monk is a serious matter, as men do not often break from society. The ceremony, in an unbroken line from the Buddha, is the cutting of the hair. A ritual sword, wielded by a senior monk, is touched to the head of the candidate. Vows are spoken in a powerful but short ceremony, considering the implications. Afterward the monk is required to keep his head shaved and wear grey robes, and to live in a monastery. An American Zen Master performed the ceremony in the desert, with a dull kitchen knife for the ceremonial sword. Since the temple had no spare robes, I wore a crude, overlarge vest and coarse pants.

As I waited for the paperwork to clear, the desert held me a short time more. The desert is a fine place to wait on things. As I walked the grounds in my new attire, ravens would land close by and look at me in a certain way, something peculiar. I began to notice things, small things, as if they were communicating with me. One would fly from east to west in a slow arc. Surely there's no meaning, but what if it were a dream? Could you still claim the movement of the beast had no relevance? The desert marked me that way.

The ox has two horns. One is pointed south. South is old molasses frozen to the side of a jar, welded to the lid which can't be removed. The other points callously north, broken off near the base, hollow. The wind cuts through, the only movement, not the dead limbs, not the empty clouds. Through them the stars are naked and cold.

HOW MANY THINGS MUST BE SACRIFICED
IF WE ARE TO GET DOWN TO THE SUBTLE GROUND?
LIKE HOLDING BACK THE SEAS TO LET THE LIGHT
PENETRATE THE DEEPEST CHASMS
IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO DELINEATE
ZEN MASTER SEUNG SAHN ONCE TOLD A STUDENT
TO CUT HIS HAIR
THE MAN WAS SO DISTRAUGHT
THAT HE DEBATED FOR SEVERAL DAYS
WHETHER TO LEAVE THE SCHOOL
FINALLY HE RELENTED
ZEN MASTER SEUNG SAHN REMARKED
"OK, THEN NOT NECESSARY."
IN A SENSE, EVERYTHING MUST BE SACRIFICED, VOWS TAKEN
TO THE POINT THE WILL IS EXHAUSTED
THE CONSCIOUSNESS BARE
IT'S THE MOST PROFOUND SACRIFICE
THIS MARRIAGE TO THE DIVINE
"WHAT MORE CAN I GIVE?"
TO BE INDOCTRINATED INTO A MONASTIC ORDER
IS THE END OF EVERYTHING
THERE WAS NO MORE ART, NO MUSIC
ENORMOUS THINGS TO ME
MY IDENTITY WAS LOST
THE PERSON I WAS BEFORE QUICKLY BECAME IRRELEVANT
A CARTOON VERSION I WAS HAPPY TO DISPENSE WITH
NOT TO SAY A NEW IDENTITY WASN'T INCULCATED
BUT, LIKE ZEN MASTER SEUNG SAHN'S STUDENT
IT WASN'T THE ISSUE

seven. **SEOUL**

To the consulate! A stack of papers to sign, photographs, thumbprints, rectal fluid, DNA, hard currency... I peered through the bullet-proof glass into an alien world. A woman stared at me through the bulletins taped across the front and asked for something I couldn't make out.

The engines whined and rumbled. The pilot gunned it for a second, then cut it back down again. We sat idle at the end of a mile of skid marks. Thunder struck, everything began to vibrate, the burnt grass fields shot by, and the sooty jewel of Los Angeles was revealed in all her glory. Streets criss-crossed in a viral network as far as I could see, until the whole was finally buried in cotton.

The programming switched from English to Korean off of Seattle. We crossed the energy belt/center date-line

at an arctic minus 70 degrees. The number two engine left an oily black line at 35,000 feet. On the horizon an expanding range of smog-brown clouds, the uppermost layer of grime.

The cabin was insular, like the inside of a canteen, with a hollow sound to everything. Whatever it was that existed below was meaningless to our roaring jet-engine race against the Pacific headwinds. The light was nearly fluorescent, a color unknown to the surging waves and foam below. There was no life in the rarefied heights, no bird or gnat or spore, only the constant thrust of the turbine and the warm human souls who shared the cabin.

The intercom whined along with the engines, suddenly crackled to life.

"Is there a doctor on the plane?"

The messages repeated with increasing urgency until finally the plane banked and made the slow turn back to Alaska.

"I have an announcement. One of the crew (the pilot) is very sick, so we're redirecting the flight to Anchorage. I repeat…"

We landed in Anchorage near dark, under a full moon larger than any I've seen. Everyone silent from fear, endured the long lines to pass through customs and enter the foreign soil. Those who drop out of the sky can't be trusted, even if they'd just flown out of Los Angeles. We

were split into three different groups: first class, coach, and my end — the nameless third. I don't know about the rest, but my party was sent to a seedy hotel past a long row of beat up houses and liquor stores.

The next morning we collected together in the lobby, the faces already familiar, a special connection between us: heroes, victims, survivors. All of us on the way to a foreign place, unwelcome, we were accepted only because of our misfortune. A beautiful look on everyone's faces because we were part of it, and no damage done!

The red velvet couches were stacked with GI's returning from leave and beautiful Korean women wrapped in scarves and black trenchcoats, or quilted down with furry boots and leather: modern and edgy, succulent, delicate. The few Korean men between them wore fitted suits. An intimate tone to their nodding, that beautiful language that makes one soft when listening, that always ends formally, in good command of the senses. Hunched toward each other like teenagers, their faces large and full of emotion; they were cold at odd moments, and then the leaning in.

The crowd around us shuffled their feet with waiting, but I refused to give up my seat, quite unlike the boy who would've given his life for the comfort of another. In my youth I had no idea what I was worth. Eventually I real-

ized that even the greatest human is still only a human being. These days I hold to the dictates of nature and luck. Regardless, those standing boarded the bus first, so we were left behind in the lucky seats.

We touched down at Kimpo airport after ten hours in the air. Security made sure I was standing in the right line through customs. They quickly rifled through my bags and motioned for me to pass. I didn't have anything. I squeezed through the crowded passage to a small patch of air. As I struggled to get my bearings, a nun from NYC touched me on the arm. She'd blended into the background so well I hadn't noticed her.

"C'mon… we've got to get moving," she blurted out, nervously eyeing the swarm of passengers, the entire floor staring at us like we were ghosts.

We raced underneath the heart of Seoul in a car packed with bad air, a swirling heat of strange creatures — a feast of eyes. I was so lost, disoriented, nothing could've prepared me for the shock of stepping into that strange world. We came out near a writhing street market. A light rain took hold, setting the mood. I tried not to be influenced by my feelings, but they were heavy enough that it was unavoidable.

The nun moved invisibly beneath her robe, so well starched and ironed. I followed her through waves of

housewives, grandmas, children, many of them laughing at the "long-nosed" foreigners, leering. Third-world machinery banged and clanged out a steady stream of potato balls and walnut cakes. Tables stretched across whole city blocks, piled high with squirming sea creatures, persimmons, giant turnips, cheap plastic fares, piles of lotus root, ferns, mushrooms and fungus of other sorts, melons and peppers, many strange and exotic vegetables, a thousand types of kimche.

At the top of the hill we joined the crowd pressing through an open gate with thick cross beams and pointed spires. The black iron beast was swung closed and bolted soon after we entered, leaving only a small trap door to pass through. It groaned on its hinges as the latch was set.

I couldn't fully register the things I saw, so long had they been in my dreams. The temple buildings were all capped with beautiful arched roofs. I was led to an enormous four-story building in front. It housed a kitchen and dining hall, a king-sized ceremonial hall for the Korean monks, and a meditation hall for the foreigners. I was crowded in with an American and a Pole in a small cell beside the tearoom. It was covered with rough wallpaper on the walls and ceiling. The floors were lacquered paper of a deep, burning yellow. Thin sleeping mats were rolled up and pushed against the walls, leaving a small patch of

floor.

Cole, the American, had a withered, haggard face, the sunken-pit eye sockets that reeked of heroin, too many cigarettes. He saw I was teetering back and forth and grabbed my leg.

"Are you feeling alright?"

"A little sick from the flight..."

"Stomach? I've got a good remedy. Hold on a second."

He sat with a city boy slouch, perfectly at ease. You got the feeling that he'd passed the flames of hell. I liked him from the first contact. Rare thing of legend and old Patriarchs — those who'd given everything, traveled to the end of the world in the pursuit of dharma. For a big insight, a big sacrifice is necessary. The Patriarch remarked, "There are great monks in Korea, but not in the city. To find a great Zen monk, you must look deep in the mountains."

Cole was of the same caliber as any of the teachers. Though well-mannered and reserved, he could easily answer any koan. He was no ordinary man, yet sat on the floor like it was nothing.

He signaled to the Pole, who silently left the room.

"We're going to take you down the hill to get a snack. Are you up for it?"

I nodded silently, nearly out of juice but curious about

the meal. The Pole returned to the cell quietly with a small Korean nun and we filed through the gate. The short walk down the hill had me intoxicated: the color of the dirt, the strange earthen smells, the peculiar Korean sounds murmured out of every hole, shaft, doorway. We walked past long rows of nondescript buildings. Korean signs by the thousands, their elegant, economic characters of simple line and circle, the genius of King Se Jong, burst like flowers from the dim storefronts.

We stepped inside a small doorway at the bottom of the hill. An old woman greeted us and led us to a small table in a room much like the cell we'd just left.

Cole, the ecstatic at the table, spoke as much with his hands as anything.

"Guksu, we'll have four bowls!"

The old woman watched over us like a proud mother — treasure of Korea, heart of Korea. I quickly fell in love with the old bosalnims (lit. *bodhisattva, or Buddhist lay-woman*). Despite the culture shock, I felt very much at home.

Life in a Korean monastery is more colorful than at the American centers. There's a hectic pace, a great influx of people, throngs of women prostrating in all the halls until late at night with a spiritual fervor that far surpasses our bookish, toe-in-the-water worthies. I was often in tears,

exhausted from the endless procession.

The halls, carefully tended places of ancient design, were specific of function, with the highest one devoted to their oldest deity: San Shin — the mountain god. Other halls were dedicated to the common Buddhist icons: Ji Jung Bosal, Kwan Se Um Bosal, Amitabul, Shakyamuni — always beautifully painted in a kaleidoscope of primary colors.

After a few days we were lined up and loaded on a bus. Not more than thirty monks and nuns, most of them from the temple in Seoul, crawled out of the woodwork for a three-day workshop at a distant temple. I joined the line of them as they bowed to the elder Korean monks in the kunbon (lit. *large room*), a requirement for leaving the temple. There was a tightening of the harness. I couldn't get comfortable in the strange garments, the incredible difference it brought. I was expected to be a spokesman — role model — religious icon for the masses. As I ran to the kunbon I stepped on my hem and nearly fell, dragging my robes through the mud before stumbling into the room.

We filed out quickly to the temple bus, which steamed through thick fog banks, past farmlands with thatched hay bales tied like broom heads — brown, stubby, terraced flats. Ghostly houses stood out against the moun-

tains and foothills with old clay-tile roofs and walls of broken white stucco. The fields were cut down for the winter — a few patches of green in the naked earth, a few smoldering fires, stone walls, everything hemmed in granite blocks.

By nightfall we arrived at a massive temple complex. We ran through the gates and quickly changed from the long robes to the even longer ones with the ceremonial kasa. To the main hall! One teacher after another ascended the high seat. A TV crew with a mob of photographers flooded us with their powerful lights. Flash bulbs ricocheted off the golden statues, raising the temperature a few sweaty degrees. Someone shoved a thousand-watt halogen in my face and the press swarmed, a fiery cairn. My belt came loose and my pants began creeping down in the flash-white glittering fantasy. My kasa followed soon after.

We walked to the lecture hall, followed by the cameras. I pulled my pants up and nodded in and out of a thirty-minute slide show that dragged on for hours.

Saturday morning jet-lag 3AM. Down the winding stone steps, through wooden gates, between rows of temples, halls, tea houses, to the cavernous main hall. Shadows fell in all corners above and below. The air was crisp with an insidious rapture. A large drum began to rumble and spit

outside, cascading relentlessly to a fever pitch. The toll of an immense bell gave way to a smaller one inside. The chanting began, thunderous, as the peal of the small bell continued to pierce the sad morning.

We stayed through the first few sutras and were marched over to the lecture hall for more speeches. We sat on thin mats on the floor as a gaunt old master told a long, haunting tale of 100,000 prostrations and disappearing into the mountains, where he survived on wild plants and roots. He didn't know what to eat, so almost died nursing a full belly of poison grass. His spirit left his body there and flew home to his mother. He tried to tap her on the shoulder, but she only collapsed in pain. Alarmed, he flew to the temple to rouse his teacher, but had no luck. With no one to turn to, he flew back to his dead body, but it wasn't there! A woodsman had found it and carried it to a nearby village, heaving it on someone's front lawn. The spirit and body were reunited there in the grass.

"From this experience," the old man croaked, "I attained enlightenment!"

He kept waving his hands with only two fingers showing on each. He'd burned the rest of them off in a questionable show of faith.

The weather held a dismal spell over us. A chemical imbalance of the brain overcast, spitting hail, marked our

return to Seoul. We had a few days of rest before kyolche. It was to be held at a 13-century old temple in the Gye Ryong mountain range somewhere south. In spite of this, everyone, taking the weather's cue, became dark and spiteful.

It was something of a tradition to down a few bottles the night before, to sink into a rosy reverie — a tribute that only broadened and deepened over time, until it was no more. I sat in the back of the room, watching the monks whispering to each other. I didn't bother with them.

"...hurry up; below, beyond the night."

Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891)

I let it go, let them go. Dreams were dashed, traditions uprooted, friends forgot, became seduced by the glistening dashboard lights, slid quietly into the promising night. I went out into the pitch dark. The candlelight stars glistened blankly, all in a confused tangle, unfamiliar. I walked down a dark hill through the humming, whirling blackness, to the tiny stream beneath it. The night air was full of dank earth and deadwood, the smell of home. I sat on a boulder and watched the inky black stream bury itself in moldering leaves, the trickle and dispersion in deathly quiet. The moon overhead luminous, I felt the

fiery exchange that comes suddenly, like lightning. The air in my lungs turned cold, pupils dilated, vision sharpened considerably — an animal, agitated, keenly aware of the movement of bugs, the cool black space between the limbs.

WITH THE ADVENT OF ZEN IN THE WEST
COMES A NEW PARADIGM
NOW WE MUST DEAL WITH THE INDIVIDUAL
IF THERE’S TO BE FURTHER MOVEMENT
LET IT BE TOWARD BECOMING WHAT WE ARE
WHAT BETTER WAY TO STUDY THAN THE LONG RETREAT
WHERE EVERYTHING IS REMOVED BUT THE SIMPLEST INTERACTIONS?
KYOLCHE IS SUCH AN INTENSE ENVIRONMENT
THAT IT TAKES THE WHOLE OF YOUR ATTENTION TO WEATHER IT
ANY NORMAL ASPECT OF HUMAN RELATIONS IS DISTORTED
THOUGH THERE’S AN ELEMENT OF COMPETITION
IT’S VERY MUCH A LONE ENTERPRISE
IF YOU’RE SERIOUS
ABOUT GETTING TO THE BOTTOM OF THINGS
IT’S THE BEST COURSE YOU COULD TAKE
“YOU MUST FIRST MAKE A FIRM DECISION TO GET ENLIGHTENMENT
AND HELP OTHERS.”
ZEN MASTER SEUNG SAHN’S TEMPLE RULES (1927-2004)
IT’S AMAZING BOTH HOW QUICKLY PEOPLE COME APART
IN THE HEAT OF IT
AND HOW THE GROUP MERGES TOGETHER
THE PEOPLE YOU SIT BESIDE BECOME CLOSE COMPANIONS
NO MATTER WHO THEY ARE
SILENCE TRANSFORMS THE PERSONALITY
INTO A DIVINE THING
WHEN EVERYONE IS UNLEASHED AT THE END
HOW QUICKLY THE PERSONA RETURNS!
AH… BUT WITH THE BREATH OF FREEDOM

eight. **GYE RYONG SAN**

Kyolche was its own nest: a great deal of sitting, the same forms, the same grey robes. I'd sat nearly every winter since the first at Providence, seven in a row. It cut my life into periods of clambering for work, working feverishly at whatever job I could find, and the tight discipline of long winters.

As much as Korea had changed, with the advent of democracy and the marvelous inventions of the West, in the monastery the old ways were strictly kept. Though Buddhism is the national religion (it may be soon eclipsed by the wildly popular Christian movement) its study is reserved for monastics — a scholar society. In fact, you weren't allowed in the dharma room unless you were a monk or nun. The Patriarch refused this model, setting

up Zen centers worldwide with the doors open to everyone. We were the prototype for a revolution, and so carried the stigma of going against the established order. A variety of souls, from the merely curious to the deeply religious, men and women together, all of us in that pressure- cooker together — the intensity of it!

The bell was rung and it was underway. Cole was at the center, seated next to Tibor, a well fed Hungarian who was given the announcements he was told to make and was otherwise quiet. Seated beneath Cole was Ben, the old housemaster from Providence. Like most dharma friends, they came back around to where you were, eventually.

Much farther down the line, I was sandwiched between two scraggly men, polar opposites. The one to my right snored loudly. Daytime was a time to endure, a light that burned too brightly. He moved quietly through the beehive with pursed lips. In the changing room — his thin arms bare, a clump of hair across his shoulder blades — his feminine delicacy set him apart, made it impossible to ignore him. In his corner seat by the door he watched everyone as they came in. At first I thought he was only staring out through the window in the hall — a symptom of cabin fever. But his eyes followed us. He watched my hands ceaselessly, looked into my box of things, peered

through a crack in the door as I walked by, his eyes burning into me.

> *"The eyes are open and squinting: the great wide-open whites of the eyes glitter with a sort of deathly, glassy light."*
>
> *Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881)*

Sound asleep, his torso would dive to the floor, then pause, seeming to reflect. If he managed to keep from hunching over his head would fall on his chest, or sway from side to side. Sometimes his head would turn, blindly, gently to me.

The one to my left was as solid and unmoving as a stone. He was a great man, indefinable in the way great men are. He was a teacher at one time who came across a rough patch and was sent to the back of the line. I came to love him very deeply because of this. As I struggled between them to damp down the torrent, the sky split open and everything went up in flames. The sun — even though an impenetrable darkness clung to all the ill-defined places — raged into the room. I was struck with the openness, the gaiety, the cordite ignition, the fetal umbilical snap-dragon fire wheel spinning out massive quantities of energy, godliness; the source of all matter, all life in the universe — sacred, magical, aflame! Flying on the heav-

enly elixir, lips curled, teeth bared, I swam in and out of euphoria. Images, impressions fresh, vivid, ceaseless — a red-orange thread over vast ranges of empty space. The entire universe was contained in that quiet room.

A woman from China brushed past as I raked leaves one morning. She carried a basket of citrus peels, which left a trail of tropical heat. Palpitating, throbbing equatorial frost-free zone stinging my dry pores, the sharp bitterness blatant in the clear, dark winter, I watched her walk through the hedgerow, up the granite steps to the kitchen. Her footing was immaculate, subtle. She moved with a naturalness that was startling. Not a trace of self-consciousness, the walk of a free woman; in one tiny step she revealed that she'd become aware of me. A miniscule miscalculation, broadcast vividly in an overly conscious placement of the slipper.

The sexual tension was increasing, a fire that wouldn't go out. The cloth contained it, made it leap fiercely across the room in dangerous arcs. Half the faces were contorted, blackened from the heat. At most a smile was offered, fleeting, or an opportune collision in the outer hallway, laughter, all the while thinking of radishes or turnips, a crescent half-moon of cabbage.

The days were a stormy mix of rapture and emotion, with no solid ground. There were times where I had a

glimpse of it, but my karma would not yet let me open to it fully, and so I couldn't recognize it for what it was. The difficulty of the confined spaces, the lack of movement, bothered me for some time, but the mystical aspect was so compelling. It's a strange place in the human psyche that can adapt to the disciplined environment and find freedom within it.

My practice had a lot of vigor, but raced past the door and out onto the highway and on and on. I hadn't reached the point where desire and emotion were calmed in the presence of the Absolute. At the time I thought there was some way to burn through it. It seemed I was making headway, but of course everything was too hot.

The women largely kept to the monastery grounds during breaks. The men dispersed to the mountains. I stayed close-by, at first. A small village spilled down the hill like a mountain stream. The narrow road snaked its way past and on up the mountain, giving way to gravel a short distance ahead. On foot I never saw more than a half-mile of it, never had a sense of where it led, or where we were. It was marvelous.

The mountains were surrounded in wreaths of rain and fog, the air filled with smoke from hundreds of outdoor crocks, the soil bare for the winter. I found a park bench hidden behind a stone wall that gave a commanding view

of the neighborhood. Houses sold trinkets on the street below, a small string of merchants surrounded by rice fields and clumps of pine trees. Dogs fought constantly in the distance, punctuated by honking geese. People walked slowly down the icy streets, often in step with one another.

One day a middle-aged Korean woman spooled in and out of the underbrush, gathering limbs for her cookstove. She worked slowly at the base of the hill, her lime green jacket shining vividly through the trees. I put my notebook away and started down through the briars, pulling out sticks as I went. At first she didn't notice me. I got a nasty thorn in my thumb and a few new holes in my disintegrating pants before wrestling out of the thicket. I held out my bundle of sticks to her, breathing hard. She stared at me breathlessly for a long moment frozen in place.

"AICHUM!"

Her bundle fell at my feet as she bolted away. I watched her bob a half-mile down the street and across the rice fields. She kept on until I couldn't see her anymore… harried, infuriated; a powdery moth tapping against the glass. Soundless fluttering, careening, I ran. The fog rose to meet me, welling up and overflowing the trees. Shapes and images marched out of the mist, flickered from their unstable origin. There were faces that I didn't recognize, bits of conversation; a dog became a woman holding a

bundle, which returned to being a road sign. I slowed to the point that I was nearly running in place, staggering. I could feel the blood raging through me. I held to the only thing I could, the pointed end of the breath, the clean white inside of things — the ringing in my ears a high and sweet sound.

…a grazing herd of cattle bent to its task while the rest, the whole of humanity, toiled under grim circumstances. The wind on the field, waves of pleasure rippling, tingling — bare in the cold grass, lazy sky, nothing to ponder: tiny pebbles, a line of ants, a tender shoot in the mouth — taste of the earth, the exposed root.

The midday sun gives way to a bottomless night. The fear vanquished, the sky void, dreams void. Animals rustle out of their burrows. A flash of teeth, a flicker of a menacing eye — understood. The pleasure unbound, tearing, consuming, every shred taken apart. Rapture alone in the dark, untold rapture, fecund; the damp penetrating, the black impenetrable.

Consumed by the path, fallen from the known, the eyes, such eyes possess everything. Look into them and you sense something terribly familiar and dear and threatening. Fear them, fear me, this night — what I have seen. This is the end. There's no going back…

I came to on the other side of the road. Cole was just passing by, feeling his way with a walking stick. His clothes

were ill-fitting, mismatched. He had very nice, expensive robes before, but had given them all away. His pocket bulged with persimmons. He thought nothing of grabbing a few from someone's courtyard prize. His generosity demanded it.

I followed him to a horde of shrines. The granite streambed was filled with icons, statues, burning candles and incense, old bosalnims offering fruit, rice, dried fish. Blackened hovels, covered with visquene, glowed with flickering candlelight — dull shadows lit up with sadness. It was a place I returned to often, drawn by the fire and smoke and babbling — a place of power.

Long legged, and long winded, Cole would race up the mountain with only minutes to spare and lunge back down like a madman. I'd follow him until something caught my eye. The wilderness can't be enjoyed at a fast pace, at any pace at all if you ask me. Cole was driven. Never stopping, he ran from something formless, something that encouraged him to eat less and less, to let his body grow pale, sickly. He looked at the world through dark eyes that mirrored an internal paleness. He nurtured not martyrdom, but dissolution. He fell neatly into a pine-box symbiosis; the weight of fresh soil pressing against the lid — suffocation, disintegration.

We came across an overgrown road high on the ridge. I

have a weird nostalgia for abandoned roads, trash dumps, ditches with old tires grown into the weeds. The breach of order, the lawlessness, the bare end of society; its remnants dragged out into the forest, taken apart, layer upon layer of information, things we were kept from knowing. A microcosm of the processes that, when taken in a larger context, was the archetype of my life's work.

I stood for a long moment basking in the forgotten feeling. The absence of light, the way the environment changed around me; a symbiotic silencing of wind and emotion. The crickets and frogs, things passed between us beyond my ability to describe.

> *"The same solitude, the same loneliness through which frail and timorous man had merely passed without altering it…"*
>
> *William Faulkner (1897-1962)*

To let a place go wild is to enter into the dream of it, where the interconnected web of life holds sway. To sit quietly in a wild setting is to sense what mind is, how it encompasses these things, animates them.

Back in the dharma room the battlefront continued to dazzle, with less the smoke and volley of continual rounds, more a casual retort with long periods of calm. But to say that a full day of meditation is calm is absurd. It's more a challenge to withstand the intensity, at times stirred to

a tempest or trembling collapse that turns the soul luminous — a fusion that bathes all participants, great or small. Worn down to the wholesome life of a toadstool or fern, breathing imperceptibly, we sat solidly in our ring; a palpable fury among us, an excitement for the eternal hours on the floor. The energy of the group, its constant bearing against the storm — eyes wide open, jaws set, tongues pressed to the roof of our mouths, as if we were leaning into it with all our might — it wasn't possible to hold to anything save the crazy heat of transmutation, and the heat only increased.

The days spun out gossamer thin, austerely bright. The snow blanketed us, pressed down on everyone, caused the blood to coagulate. The viscosity of the water changed. Tiny droplets skated across its skin. The iridescent glimmer of white. Lines were blurred; visitors in the courtyard came and went too quickly to be recognized. It was a heightened vortex, an abrupt disconnect from the 9 to 5 world. The day's events were precisely the same from end to end, making it increasingly difficult to find a point of reference.

All of us kept our eyes down when changing clothes together in the cramped room, elbows flying in the eternal last-minute chaos; a whirlwind that caught us in our own thoughts, hammered us into cognition, action — al-

ways respectful of each other, quiet. The discipline was felt everywhere, even in the bathhouse, as we had little water and were rationed only two basins a week. It was impossible to find a time when the tiny room wasn't full of naked, hairy men. If I did find it vacant, Ben would be the one to pop in on me. He'd scrub his laundry while I bathed, pumping his undergarments in and out of the bucket, slowly, methodically. It kept him sane. He'd stare across the tiny room like one of Gary Larson's cartoon animals, always with a ring of toothpaste around his mouth. He loved that bathhouse! He'd spend every break in the dismal space, crowded into a corner with his laundry. If he wasn't there he'd stand at his station in the changing room with his back to everyone, staring intently at the wall.

After lunch Tibor stood to address the assembly.

"I killed a bird by accident. I made a gesture with my mouth and he flew at me, into the glass doors, and died."

The room responded to his confession by freezing in place. He was too distraught to make the next sitting period; a good boy. I went to the bathhouse on a hunch and it was vacant. Ben pushed in moments later bellowing like a Clydesdale pulling a heavy load.

"Is anyone else coming?" he frothed.

I'd just worked up a good lather between my legs,

crouched over a wash basin. I regard this as the mark of an old student — able to look you in the eye while giving their scrotum a good scrubbing, all of it even, at ease, with humor! I looked up at him. He stood smiling, waiting.

"I don't know who's coming…"

He shrugged his shoulders and went to the corner to brush his teeth. Outside Cole shot past like a lawn dart. The weather broke behind him, the atmosphere charged with static. The color faded to black. Everyone was agitated. Tibor had to bury the dead bird in the downfall.

The wind picked up; the bells that hung from the eaves blew and clanged, messages from some other realm. The grey Korean sky, bare above the rough stone walls, a desolate, empty thing. No magpies, no finches or warblers, the gnarled pines held the ridge. Twisted and tough, they soaked in the drizzling damp with a quiet resignation. Far below a mass of bamboo grew thick together; no space even for light to squeeze through. The sun was aflame in another world, one with singing birds and flowers, bumblebees. This was a frozen, blank place.

We were admonished for leaving the temple grounds at night — not allowed! And, because it was a "beautiful day," they didn't want us to forget our heads with all the sunshine. I answered a very mundane koan correctly.

"It's wrong?"

“You don’t believe in yourself!”
“Ah… so the answer’s right?”
“Just return to your practice.”

The birds were overjoyed. Some of the persimmon trees still held their fruit. The magpies lorded over these, squeaking and jerking their asses in the air while smaller birds flew in and out. Man, they were having a good time! I didn’t believe in myself, but the world was moving along famously. One of the magpies dropped a flaccid persimmon, which fell through ten layers of languor and flattened quietly in the leaves. Everyone was too busy with the feast to notice.

The moon quickly swelled in the frosty firmament, three-quarter full and everyone felt it. The women were all on the same menstrual tide-pool, and it was near the end of their eggs. They fastened to Cole two at a time. He wasn’t in the mood for it, but still they clung to him, gaped at him from across the room like hungry fish.

We made our escape to the work period. We were moving dirt, what we managed to free from a frozen hill of stones. The land sloped down from the kitchen. Runoff gathered in rivulets that cut through the road. It was our job to repair it, taking turns with the pick-axe in the morning dark. Cursing, I whistled to myself, violating the frozen ground, sinking the blade to the hilt.

The monks were in good humor, though they said little. The shovel was unfamiliar to them, the earth too coarse — the whipping mistral air drone, the sexual thrust of the five-pound head driving relentlessly into the black hill; the smell of an open grave.

A fire pit glowed nearby, burning off our daily waste. I threw a few branches on and gesticulated wildly, clawing the smoke. Crouching near the blaze I felt a surge of power. Cole laughed at me from the other side. We'd been talking about a woman from Hong Kong who'd flown in for the intensive week. Projecting silver moonbeams, she shone timidly from across the room. She seemed to embody the whole of Chinese ancestry, yet accessible, willing.

"Women," Cole said, "come into this world for one reason. Why do you think they have tits and an ovary?"

Everything has to do with sex, every pause, every snowy white patch of skin. Either drawn together for a raucous fuck, pummeled for failing it, or wanting more, every animal, every mound of dirt has the same need: to be drawn into a quivering vaginal abyss, to shoot endlessly in spine-bending electro-mucousis in a sheen of sweat, gripping a heaving teat, hot breath in the ear…

We quit the work detail and went out past the latrine, down the frozen road, wearing only our powder–blue

slippers. The world burned in silver-gold. Light refracted off the white expanse, turning everything sallow. A woman peered out an open door, but I couldn't bring her into focus. She'd blended in with the dripping sky.

The entire world was drawn into the fervor of kyolche. Form had little to do with its everyday appearance. The bold placement of a simple stone! A bizarre thrust of bamboo! I began laughing out loud, biting myself, lost in a state of euphoria and fatigue. The sky and earth came together, all of it blurred in variations of white. The magpies continued to bicker and frolic through the trees. They'd alight on the rice paddies and pick through the snow — a vivid black and white exclamation — the only movement in field after field of deathly quiet. Anyone who appeared moved quickly out of view, adding to the vacant mood.

We discovered a loosely gathered knot of tin sheds full of grunting beasts. In front was an incredibly large boar with huge pointy ears that drooped down at odd angles and tiny, piercing eyes. His white hide was covered in several layers of shit and mud. The only male on the compound, it was his job to service nearly four-hundred females. His balls hung down ominously, testament to his exploits. Preoccupied with a dead water sprinkler, I could almost hear his mind working.

"*Water...*"

The sows filled most of the other buildings. They lived their whole lives in steel cages just large enough for them to stand in place. They were only let out to pay the boar a visit, or to the slaughter. The nursing mothers had their own wing, their little ones blinking shyly from cardboard boxes. Each had a heat lamp inside with a small doorway cut into it so they could get out of the cold. The mothers lay on their sides in special cages, serving the good milk. Some of the newborn still trailed an umbilical cord.

The baby pigs stared at me from their lighted boxes with sweet, pure eyes — completely innocent, worthy. I saw their whole lives in that moment, from peaceful light box to cage to slaughterhouse. What struck me wasn't the horror, but the beauty. It was a complete life, every meal a delight, every day a sacrament.

A Catholic church stood at the corner. We went in to pay our respects, but found it empty. The whole valley seemed frozen still. My feet began to throb menacingly. Fortunately, the road was hard-packed. We skated through the village and all the way back to the gate.

The winter solstice: the longest night, the most feminine — silk lined, somnolent. With all the red beans and demons and squirrels with great, furry ears I was afflicted with an enormous erection. The wind picked up like never before, banged against the doors and rattled the

broomsticks. A witch's night. Agitated, I walked out into the whirling gusts, but found nothing. The moon was bright, highlighting a racing line of clouds. I walked past the graves, listened to the hoary tangle of voices, drums, howling dogs. The sky was clear. A multitude of stars, vacant as pinholes in a black shroud, cut through the smoke, in an instant shockingly void — a blast of pure nitrous over a featureless horizon. A welt on the back of my neck registered the oscillating frequencies like a festering antennae. It began to buzz and pulse as if God had fixed me through the open pore. It shot through my veins and glowered opaque-cinnamon warm, radiating open-bandwidth. I was full of juice and singing.

In the morning Cole and I burned a mound of blood-soaked rags, an effigy to our tormented friends. Miraculous how women came into sync when they lived together. Why would it occur, other than to turn the tribe back on itself? To thin out the feeble stock? The emotive egg-bearers sharpened their fingernails, plotting against reason to ride a spouting cock, to be the tree heavily laden with fruit. How divine to feel a new life take hold, to grow with the seasons into a taught, round pear, to beg for mercy and painkillers as the harvest drew near, to look into the eyes of a new life! For this any amount of hell raising was justified. All adversaries were bitches, all

cock-wielding men royalty, at least until the first sign of blood. It was a full moon of failed conceptions.

Wearied, I sat on a pile of rubble near the latrine. A parade of thoughts ran me down into the flickering well of unconsciousness. All around me sharp objects protruded from the soil. A boulder we'd set near the walkway stood out like a demon tooth. Hell was near at hand. I thought back along the course of my life. In so many memories the beast leered, occasionally destroying everything, piercing, devouring, mocking. It may seem contradictory, but it was toward life, not death, that it pressed me. Whatever you call it: fear, karma, impermanence, the noise of dissolution — the currents were discharged in the field of the Absolute.

A single drop of water fell from the eaves, stretched long and thin like a white apparition, cutting into the blistering hollow. Impossible but this would happen inside, like a spectral line through an old black and white film. The darkness wavered. A mighty hammer rang down in a fiery arc, breaking apart the whole cognizance. I couldn't move, such burning! Everything of me was consumed in flames, rapture. I struggled to my feet and staggered toward the meditation hall.

The moon passed into decline without incident, the hours heightened, dissolute. Entire days were taken up

in the convection with no residual feeling. Driven by the tremendous inertia of constant meditation, everyone shone visibly. I found a woman in the courtyard wrapped around an old tree, a young student I'd met on the bus.

"You know, I don't really believe all of this," she'd whispered.

"It doesn't matter."

She turned her head so she could see me without losing contact with her intimate. She sighed for a long moment, telepathically linking together the earth and sky. When she finally spoke, almost inaudibly, her eyes were focused on something far away.

"*I-don't-want-to-leave…*"

Her face, thick with rapture, turned lovingly back to the tree as the busses pulled in below. Fifty shades of grey spilled out, overflowed the narrow bridge, overwhelmed the tourists. Swirling, they tugged the shopkeepers out into the morning damp, marched up the hill, and penetrated the lower gate.

A wave of madness rose overhead. The open air of the courtyard ignited with all of the hearts aglow. They flowed into the dharma room, where all the snacks were laid out; the tatami on center stage a cornucopia surrounded by leering beasts. I filled my pockets and hid behind the altar, listening to the tramplings, snorts, bellows, and other

domestic sounds. At least a dozen plastic bags were crinkled and harassed across the room — like a pack of dogs at a trash pile.

I made a beeline to the bus. There were arms out every window, chocolate spilling out of every row. Down the aisle head first through a smog cloud of hormone sweat and enough hot breath to grow lichen, I found Cole with his head down, whistling and chortling through his sleeve.

"Are you getting enough oxygen?"

"This is way too much! Where's your helmet? Are you crazy!"

"I must've left it at the canteen! Is there more action ahead?"

"We got action right now! *Get - down - here*!"

I'd just planted myself in the seat when Tibor leaped onboard with a cardboard box.

"Mail call!"

The whole bus lunged forward, causing the driver to exit unexpectedly. He came back in mad as hell, cranked the engine, and we hit the road.

"Goodbye Gye Ryong San!"

KOREAN CULTURE HOLDS TO ITS PARTICULAR WAY
OF DOING THINGS WITH INCREDIBLE TENACITY
EVEN THE FREEDOM OF THE SELFLESS PATH
IT SEEMS CONTRADICTORY
AND CERTAINLY FALLS SHORT IN MANY INSTANCES
BUT THE STRONG EFFORT
TO KEEP THE TRADITION ALIVE
HAS ALLOWED THE VERY DIFFICULT ZEN PRACTICES
TO SURVIVE
WHILE THEY'VE DISAPPEARED NEARLY EVERYWHERE ELSE
WITHOUT THEIR INTENSE STRIVING TO KEEP THE FORM
THE WORLD WOULD'VE SUFFERED A GREAT LOSS
TO TAKE PART IN THEIR ANCIENT PRACTICES
WAS THE GREATEST HONOR BESTOWED ME IN THIS LIFE
AND INDEED MY WORK HERE IS IN SOME WAY
TO HELP CONTINUE THE LINE
TO BE ACCEPTED INTO THE ORDER THE CANDIDATE
MUST SERVE AS A LABORER
OF THE LOWEST POSSIBLE POSITION
ONE THAT HAS NO COUNTERPART IN THE WEST
LOWER EVEN THAN A PRISONER
TO BE SUDDENLY CHANGED FROM A MAN OF THE WORLD
TO A DOG IS SUCH A RIDICULOUS PROPOSITION
THAT IT BECOMES SURREAL
NO ONE WOULD WALK WILLINGLY INTO SUCH A ROLE
YET FOR THE SPIRITUAL SEEKER IT'S A TRIFLING SHIFT
IF THE ADEPT IS TRULY SINCERE IN HIS ASPIRATIONS
WHY WOULD IT MATTER WHAT COLOR THE ROBES?

nine. **HAENGJANIM**

The Korean order invited all the foreign monks to a ceremony for the handicapped. We were the important guests they put in folding chairs off to the side. Two Catholic nuns in black — austere young faces, pious, tight-skinned — sat across from us. We all watched the chorus girls in their show dresses, which flared out at chest height, completely concealing any trace of figure. A doll's dress that suggested the waist began under the arms: innocent and contrived, billowing layers of polyester with embroidered flowers tied with a bow. They sang beautiful hymns and, like the rest of us, nodded off when the speeches began.

The sky turned cold, filled with dark clouds. I stared solemnly out of the field of gray, watched the podium with its eternal ring of cameras. Swallows with sharp wings sailed through the heavy skies. The speeches wore on. Since I understood nothing, and quickly tired of the

birds, I began to watch the cameramen. They placed their well-oiled tripods gingerly between the rows as the choir rustled to life, fumbling with their sheet music stands. The last speech died out. It took three tries to get the piano rolling, then the choir kicked in and everything was alright. The crowd wavered momentarily, then collapsed into a nearby building. It was a treatment facility for the handicapped funded by the Buddhist order. A wonderful reason to call us out into the weather, but I had no idea.

The monks that delivered us to the event disappeared, leaving us to walk a long mile back to the bus. I passed back and forth through the ranks, enjoying the strange and worn personalities who infallibly fell in line, single file. We marched in our long gray robes like pale ghosts of the Confederate South, saying little.

Xui, a tiny nun from Singapore, pulled me toward the art markets near Chogye-Sa. We crammed together in the rush-hour subway, endured the feasting eyes. Fame, infamy, a Western face brought both. I leaned back against the door and went from eye to eye. Hardly a face softened. The only bit of warmth was the random flirtatious smile, more potent behind the barriers of culture and language. Pressed back against the door I mirrored each gaze with a mask of impenitence.

"It's very difficult here," she whispered.

"Meditation isn't confined to the dharma room, but involves all of life. They support each other, the formal and informal aspects. In the same way you allow good and bad thoughts, nature allows the whole gamut, loves all things equally."

"It's not that… the forms are stifling… how can you make a life here?"

"When you act together with others your mind loses its sense of individuation. It's a matter of survival. Of course it rebels at first, but if you continue the illusion of separateness will come apart. Use it, to drill down to the core."

She sighed heavily, "I suppose…"

"It's not easy… whatever you do differently, they will root it out, an endless line of citizens pressing you to conform. *You will lose your identity*."

She laughed, pushing me away.

"Ok, ok… hey look! That's what I was talking about…"

The street was furious, packed tight and bursting with foreigners. We hit a few shops on the way south. The sun was fierce. My head began to bristle in the hot ozone-free UV's. We met a Korean couple who spoke a little English. They took us through a maze of side-streets to a narrow passage that twisted drunkenly into the heart of Inson-Don. Every door fronted a restaurant or tea-house. We checked out a dozen places, stopping at a low-class

joint. Ravenous, we sat on the warm floor next to a young couple and a Korean monk. The waitress was busily serving four different parties, constantly bending over at the waist in form-fitting polyester.

The street continued the provocation, a riot of captivating spring dresses and perfect lipstick. Girls stood out with plump thighs, olive-gold flesh pumping under short black dresses, pressed into breathtaking blue denim. Small breasts, narrow hips, a pleasing roundness, trim and light and delicate, certainly one of God's most beautiful creatures.

I leaned over the counter of a tea shop into the crushing space of tinkling-star spandex stretched tight and shimmering across a thrusting 34-B, into her soft-focus perfume and outlined lips, lips that promised eternal bliss and thanked me for the 30,000 won.

I sank into the bus seat, lurid, famished, a multitude of firm young bodies bending and writhing in front of me, so close my vision blurred. Through the murky window the streets teemed with more of the same. They swayed into the evening sun, casting writhing shadows. Only the shadows remained.

The next morning I was called to the office. The Abbot leaned over the desk and looked me over. He spoke quickly to a young Korean monk, who translated.

"…you're going to be a haengja (lit. *novice monk*), right?"

"I'm already a monk. The Patriarch sent me here to do the kyoruk."

"In order to attend kyoruk, you must be a haengja for six months."

Suddenly the smile went off my face. Instead of entering the practicing stream as a monk, I was sent to the back of the line, dressed in brown robes, and from that point on, wasn't allowed to leave the temple grounds. Unfortunately, I wasn't alone. Ben and Xui joined me, along with Zosha, a tough Polish woman with sullen blue eyes. There was something in her voice that whistled at you, a thin, reedy sound that put me off from the first day.

"The irritability that comes from ill breeding."

Stendhal (1783-1842)

The Korean monks lorded over us with absolute authority, showing nothing but idle tolerance, if they spoke at all. Behind their tough exterior most were amused by our strange assembly, but since we were foreigners, and would never be Korean, there was a line drawn somewhere.

The temple was flooded with bosalnims radiant with love and everything good about humanity. To swim through

a crowd of them was enough to make one saintly. But I was to keep my head down, my hands clasped in front, and to keep a frantic pace. We brought endless dishes of fruit, panchan (lit. *side dish for rice*), rice cakes, and cookies to and from the various ceremonies, washed the dishes, cleaned the halls, and took care of the linen. We washed the bowl cloths by hand, which were scrubbed with a bar of soap and boiled in a pot outside. They had to be spotless and folded with precision, hard to pull off with the tools given. I'd grade them according to the hierarchy in the kunbon, giving the worst rags to the haengjas at the end.

This sort of duty was our training, to work in the environment alone. There wasn't any communication other than how to perform our tasks, and whatever it was we were doing wrong. Everything they asked me to change, I changed. I didn't care what their plans were ultimately, only to hit the mark. The usual training forms were unavailable to us. We could only sit a few rounds in the morning, and straight to work. Though the fire of practice was low, the foundation was strengthened, the active principal of meditation put to the test. In today's climate this is of vital importance. To be pressed to the point of absolution, it's a great deal more than can be conveyed. It still confounds me to this day. Where did I get the notion?

What am I made of? Time was taken from me. Never more than six hours of sleep, I sleepwalked through endless tasks. There was hardly time to sit down. I paid dearly for the privilege to eat at the low table — a temple slave in a slave costume, unable to refuse a single command.

I was told to strike the big bell in the courtyard at the beginning and end of the day. Shorty gave the first lesson. He'd flown in a few months before. The desert was too hot, too remote for his mangled wiring. I hadn't seen much of him until I became a haengja, as he was doing his own training on the Korean side. Confined to the temple grounds for an adolescent eternity, he was even more punchy than usual.

Marcin joined us. A bad seed, probably institutionalized by now, one of the many foreigners who passed through with no formal ties to the school.

"What are you guys doing over there?" he muttered.

"Shorty's giving me a lesson."

He grimaced and grabbed the rail. As he clung to it his head slunk down, his chin coming to rest between his hands. From there he noticed a pit underneath the bell.

Shorty got excited and pointed to it. "It has a kimche pot inside of it… see for yourself!"

Marcin got on his hands and knees and eased his head toward the hole. As soon as he was underneath, Shorty

released the chain and slammed the striker down.

"BOOOOOONG!"

Marcin shot out like an angry tick, clasping his ears. He looked at me in a sinister way, like Poe's dog in a box, that was as good as a promise, but he spoke finally as if nothing had occured.

"I need to know more about this bell. Is there a book I can read?"

"Do I understand nature? Do I understand myself? No more words."

Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891)

Cole laughed as he hurried me in front of him.

"I'm joining the 3000 bows tonight. Are you going?"

"I've never heard of it."

"C'mon!"

The night fell razor sharp; the sonorous, cool night air punctuated by a lovely chorus. My back was covered in cold sweat. My flat feet began their evil prodding; the hamstring of my left leg became inflamed. The angels floating above the altar looked on passively, woodenly. A dark candlestick flickered underneath, agitating them, casting long shadows. I watched their faces; an unformed prayer. I suffered alone, rose and fell with a full house of

bosalnims seven hours more. A new day began, seamlessly joined to the long-suffering night. The cruel 3am bell sounded just after I'd found my bed. Fed and loaded with tasks, I tended the ceremonies and washed dishes, limping, bent over, cynical, clean — relieved to be away from the floor. A few months later Cole talked me into it again.

Always someone in need of a friend. Not me. I had the idea to move through a room without being noticed. I'd usually talk to everyone at first, to burn through it all. Sometimes I'd try to keep quiet, but it would usually draw attention. The cutting through was my ease of being. My ease became theirs, if only for the length of a conversation. The absence of individuation is a deeper form of anonymity. Later I found a greater nobility and freedom in my own quiet mind. If I wanted nothing, there was no resonance to be controlled, and so no need to do anything outwardly.

Marcin stared intensely with a wrinkled, dour face at anyone who entered the room. He drew out the worst in everyone. The place was too hot for his type. He was too conspicuous. A swarm gathered behind him, muttering silently. Before I could find a way around his indignation he was asked to leave.

He refused to go, of course. The temple directors had several meetings to figure out what to do with him. They

finally agreed to let him stay if he'd keep silence, do three thousand prostrations, a repentance ceremony, take the Buddhist precepts, and continue with a thousand prostrations a day. The Patriarch was drawn to the turmoil.

"Put it all down! Put down your opinion, your condition, and your situation. Do you understand?"

"…but… I'm innocent…"

There was not even the smallest opening in him. After a few days brooding he began packing his things.

"I can't take Buddhist precepts. I know I won't keep them."

Like many who tried their hand at Zen, he wasn't able to assimilate it, so moved on to other things. The practice must heat up to the point of a break, the mind forged, tempered, hurried. The fire must be hot enough for fusion to take place. It's not about following the rules, or a fantasy made real, but the furnace of Ta Hui. For those who persevere, there's a confirmation, a proof of the inconceivable words of the masters. But for the many who never get past the initial burning, if nothing ignites in them… well, there's the pitfall. The tracks are soon laid, and once the course is set there's little anyone can do to correct it, save a natural disaster, near-death experience, or calamity of this sort.

The haengjas were allowed a few hours at a bathhouse

once a month. By chance our first outing was the day Marcin left. We followed behind him under a drizzling sky. A beautiful young Italian came with us. She was staying at the temple a few days until her visa cleared. She had perpetually flushed cheeks and a sensuous, full mouth that came very close to being kissed.

I asked Tibor for some umbrellas. He was out of breath after running down the stairs, but it was clear enough I was out of luck.

"No! …disappear… nothing coming back here… this bucket?"

Fortunately an old bosalnim was nearby, who dug a tiny, flowery umbrella out of a pile of broken cabinets. I walked out into the mist with my strange companions, waving goodbye with that ridiculous thing. We caught a cab at the bottom of the hill. Marcin continued ahead on foot. He refused to look as we passed. I never saw him again.

We got out at a seedy bathhouse and stripped down. Of course the women had their own baths separate from us. There were a dozen Korean men standing naked in front of the TV, a barber's chair, and a large, tiled chamber filled with showers mounted near the floor, with small plastic stools for scrubbing down. There were three pools: one hot, one hotter, and one ice cold. Glass doors opened to a

steam room and dry sauna, and a quiet room where you could rest under an amber lamp, like a film developing room.

Everyone was in good spirits. Too bad Marcin hadn't joined us. It's something wonderful and decent to join in a neighborhood bath. All levels of society used them, still the custom as modern plumbing is a relatively new phenomenon. It brought the community together. There were no politics in the shower room, save who could hold out the longest in the steam room.

Nearly singing, I shared the umbrella with my Italian friend. A crime, it drew out her warm pressings, soft and fragrant in the settling rain. She looked ravishing, had the sense to laugh at me. She kept giving me the "fuck me" signal, which sang out from her shapely young body, magnified by the lurid grey sinkhole above. I knew that I had her, that with slight effort I could enter her vulval bond. To be entwined in the thousand decencies. I could readily see the longing behind her words. I could have easily overpowered her. It intoxicated her, as she was well aware of this. We walked down the glistening avenue in the ecstasis of a promise, a promise that would never unfold.

An excruciating repression found us both parched, deeply searching each other for any sign of weakness. Not

left alone, we watched each other through the crowds in lust-anguish and paced the halls. She left her mark on me, walked out without a goodbye as I stumbled to the kunbon.

Old wallpaper covered the ceiling, beams, and doors, five layers deep. Our job was to tear it all down. Utility knives slashed delicately for the 220 lines buried underneath. I cut open my thumb and smeared scarlet over the razed patches. Not to be outdone, Cole bit into a live wire and blew out the circuits. We worked in the dark. The paper came off reluctantly, pulling with it bits of plaster and dirt. Rotten dust hung in the air. Silently cursing, we had most of it down by lunch.

In the afternoon they split the party in two. I was sent to the basement with Damian, a tall, fierce Pole who'd been on silence for a year, only communicating with a notepad and a burgeoning vocabulary of gestures, moans, and whistles. He boiled with pent up words, words painful to endure. He pestered me into a mountain of old lanterns. I pointed to the basement door, which was far away and lit up with cold sunlight. I said, "Do you see that? That's truth. Everything else is bullshit."

He squinted his eyes, "Do you mean you're bullshit?"

"Exactly."

He gave an insulting gaze that spoke volumes. He'd ob-

viously been caught doing something wrong, as a year of silence is a punishment of sorts. What did it have to do with me? Was it my low position in the hierarchy? Was I somehow a threat? Why is organized religion so often intolerable?

"I piss on it all from a considerable height!"
Louis-Ferdinand Céline (1894-1961)

You could feel it, the pull of gravity on him. He'd never used drugs or alcohol, never touched cigarettes, didn't like sex. I resolved to avoid him unless it was obvious, sometimes even then. Of course he eventually became a teacher.

The mountain of lanterns, more than five thousand, had to be peeled and stripped to their skeletal wire frame, covered with fresh rice paper, and overlaid with pink or white petals — more than a hundred on each. The amount of hand-work was enormous. The lanterns would hang in the courtyard for Buddha's Birthday, each bearing a streamer with its donor's wishes.

The lantern project had us in the kunbon most of the day. The momentum gained, the full moon pushed us farther down. The floor crawled with bosalnims. They were exasperating, fast, pushy, boisterous, a few ridiculously

beautiful for the sake of torment. In Korea the temples were filled with lay people, mostly women, who did their own practices or hired monks to perform ceremonies. The temple, a cornerstone of society, meant many different things, many of them unknown to me.

Trapped in the feverish room, swimming through the springtime madness — body heat — the shy creatures watched over me as if I were an exotic pet. The smell of spring flowers and women in their prime breeding season; I found myself staring back at them, caught in hopeless dreams of my own.

Signals flew by the hour, comforted me that the world was thriving still, that the intoxicating feminine charms were not absolved. The beehive rustled with fertile, agile creatures. My seed held the promise of a new life. My back was strong, eyes clear. Women danced around me with aching hearts and the heavy burden of an empty womb. This eternal drama tugged at the corners just as the funeral ceremonies, clustered tightly, cut each day into segments of mourning, sad faces, and endless baskets of fruit. In the spaces between we worked on the lanterns. On a bright, sunny day an old bosalnim cried out.

"KAAAAA!"

Clutching a stack of papers, she fell to the steps. A funeral banner fluttered in the wind, passed back and forth in

front of my face, gently touching me on the cheek, pushing me into a tremulous euphoria.

Another woman stood in the doorway, delicate and precious in pure white. The day before she'd led the choir. Her mouth invoked a threshing rapture, pulled me into her sorrow. Her dark beauty seduced me, took me away from the paper lantern fury. It all became her and her twisting, spiraling melody. She stepped into her shoes and turned toward me, sorrowfully bowing deeply, cutting into me, forcing me to recoil. A flawless creature hastily moving as a flashpoint in the eye, she glimmered and shone like an antique diamond.

She squeezed the old woman on the shoulder as she passed. The banner was carefully rolled together and taken away to burn. I watched her move through the courtyard, her white dress shining until the last, kerosene vapors that clung to me through the dreamless night.

I saw her again the next day, clasped in the arm of another beauty. I shouldered a basket of fruit and walked beside them down the long path to the kitchen. They talked softly with each other. A feminine gentleness, estrogen perfumed sweat. We stole glances at each other but no attempt was made to breach the wall; nothing tangible passed between us. I walked beside them mute, unable to say the simplest thing, bent under the weight of a full

basket.

She had her husband in tow the next time I saw her. The same flickering eyes that had caused so much staring at the ceiling in consternation turned innocent. So easily quieted! An arid life; an absence of life, of subdued passion.

Damian spoke out at our weekly house meeting.

"I think everyone should keep silence in the kunbon."

His voice was calm as he spooled out that bit of bromide. To cut apart the daily routine under "holy" pretense, the audience a symbolic representation.

He continued, "I will keep silence for the first three days of each month, and each Monday."

Several decided to join him. Some weren't eating. My stomach turned — something in the air. Out of work detail, the dark cell, cluttered with Ben's bags of laundry, lit by a crude rice-paper lamp, had a pungent, trailer park apathy. I began reading Tae'Go and became infused with the blight of reason. Antiseptic, plunged into the fleshy virus with Chinese yellow pills and instant coffee and kids squealing outside, I spent all day under a summer quilt, shuffling downstairs only to ring the bell and signal the meals and sit at the table across from the haengjas.

I got my strength back after a few days. My reward: hours of peeling and grating a pile of pumpkins. They

were small and dense, with a very thick skin. The knives flashed dangerously as we squatted on the floor. The blood pooled in my head, a dull throb that began to work on me.

The funerals ended suddenly. Shorty and I ran between the halls until the kitchen swallowed us again. Crowded between the besotted haengjas and an alarming number of bosalnims, we swam through the murky dishwater haze crazed, babbling nonsense. Not more than half an hour later we sat in the sweathouse twisting petals. I began coughing again, the virus festered in me like a raging summer storm, but I kept on.

Inexplicably, Damian was civilized. I mentioned it offhandedly to one of the Poles. The crowd within earshot quieted.

"You don't understand him."

I had him far enough away that he couldn't run me through, whatever was in play. I understood the need of a partner, friendship, but why manufacture enemies? Are we no better than dogs? Truth is bent, or abandoned, in the rush to dominate, and anything that can be felt out in the dark serves as a weapon.

"We can no longer resist evil; we must accept."

Henry Miller (1891-1980)

I put the lantern down and walked out, to get some air. The relentless hammering broke something in me. I saw the sun come up over the trees, watched the sunrise for the first time since I'd arrived in Seoul. So many things had fallen into neglect. I had little time to take in the world, and what little beauty fell beneath the trampling hooves. They fought among themselves for position, slandered each other out of envy, despair. Endless posturing, mediocre at best, easily duped, opinionated, talkative, not an ounce of insight, persistently grating on the nerves. I crouched alone in the ant hill, allowing them to crawl through me, to devour me. It gave them pleasure.

THERE'S A GREAT CONTRAST BETWEEN THE RELIGIOUS IDEAL
AND WHAT WE MUST SHOVEL THROUGH
THE "DREAM OF THE UNICORN"
HAS CAUSED UNTOLD SUFFERING
TO CONFRONT THE DEMON HORSE
THE INDOCTRINATION OF A NOVICE
OFTEN FOCUSES ON THE BODY ALONE
FROM THE PRELIMINARY PRACTICES OF TIBETAN BUDDHISM
TO YOGA, TAI CHI, SUFISM
THE SAME METHODOLOGY EVERYWHERE
IF YOU TRAIN AS A HAENGJA
THERE WILL BE HARDLY A MENTION OF THE MEDITATION HALL
IN MY CASE, THERE WAS ONLY THE WEIGHT OF THE TRADITION
THE INCREDIBLE WISDOM PASSED DOWN
THROUGH THE TEACHING STORIES OF THE MASTERS
BUT THE ACT OF GIVING IN
ACTING TOGETHER WITH OTHERS
CHANGED THE WAY I VIEWED MYSELF
FROM THE OUTSET I DIDN'T HAVE ANY DESIRE
TO BECOME ENMESHED IN A FOREIGN DOGMA
I ENTERED THE TRADITION TO FURTHER THE PRACTICE
I OPERATED FROM MY OWN HEART
WHICH MADE IT NEARLY EFFORTLESS
BUT IT ALSO MEANT, IF I WAS TO HONOR MY OWN COMMITMENT
THAT I WAS ONLY MAKING CONCESSIONS
TO THE LAWS PUT IN FRONT OF ME
WHAT I TRULY FOLLOWED
WAS THE ABSOLUTE
WHICH NEGATED ALL OF IT

ten. **MONSOON**

Leaden, the days showed cruel lines on once featureless, smooth skin. Everything was lost in the downpour, all of it hammered, pummeled together under a tremendous weight.

I ducked into the bellhouse, watched through pointed rails as rivulets formed like cataracts across the courtyard, overflowed the french drains, cut channels through the sand on the way to the swollen creek. I stood gaping at the wild breach of order as a yellow apparition flicked past. Xui, stirred out of the kitchen by the onslaught, held the gate closed and giggled at me through the rails. Reckless, dissolute, the spasming cycle of sex; the fount of life.

She was tougher than she looked. Out of all of us, Zosha was the biggest threat, so of course they had to square off. Xui made it plain with her mashing, shoving, wind-

mill dishwashing technique, though she tried to be civil. Small-boned and tough, drained from the intensity of her anger, she wouldn't think twice about dotting your eyes with her tiny fists.

Zosha perfectly ascended from the black depths. I struggled constantly not to dash her against the furniture. Odd that this thing that fouled the air was capable of jabbering with others, that they weren't holding their noses and frowning. The horror of her features projected pure menace, but the frequencies were cleverly masked. She studied us, borrowed her affectations from us. Her movements negated this, but only, I'm sure, to one who'd been ravaged by her type before.

They promised to pull us all under, the light extinguished as resolutely as a candle snuffed out. Ben bore the darkening tide with indifference, with an ease I found admirable. It encouraged her. Zosha became more domineering with him. A mighty wave threatened — innocent talk of night practice, prostrations, emotions, panties drying on the rack. Ben halfway realized the horror that was courting him and withdrew. The pressure that had been building let out like a lanced boil.

Zosha sat across from us and our dishes of cabbage.

"I'm going to do a thousand prostrations a day. What about you?"

Xui, frowning, said nothing. Ben smiled as if he hadn't really understood, but wanted to appear knowledgeable. The stuffiness, the lack of air, quieted everyone for a stale moment.

You could see nature working more easily through the competitive student. They went through very rigorous training, driven by their own ambitions, until their attempts to establish some sort of identity were exhausted and the subtle ground revealed. No one could force another to go to such lengths. Nature does it effortlessly.

I left them in the dining hall and wandered into the streambed. A small bird raced past. As I stepped closer to get a good look, a much larger one stabbed through the trees. With a nasty shriek it bit into the small one and pulled out a beak-full of feathers. They flew off in a grim death-snarl, a dozen feathers twirling in the sun.

"Zosha not natural, she's a demon. She plays, but it's a lie. Never sincere. So much lie! It's not our work, not catch you. You understand? Later it will come back to her. You must be strong."

Xui had followed behind, nearly whispering. When I returned to the kitchen Zosha got on her knees, teeth too close to me; the damned hot breath! She threw my towel down on the floor. Her mouth formed around features of clay, her eyes cold and distant.

"Look… this is how you fold a towel…"

I grabbed one and flung it in her face. It was too much for her. She went outside and stood near the dumpster, her arms crossed, looking as if someone had run her through. I walked out to console her, but only managed to nod in her general direction. Her eyes reflected the vivid sorrow that clung, as the seeping fog of the monsoon, to all sordid places. She smoldered a few days more, turning more and more pale. She tried to stay apart from the rest of the haengjas, but we only pressed more tightly to her, out of magnetism or some other ungodly force. Finally she fell sick and crept to her cell.

Life, since its impetus, has fought to exist. To relinquish the fight is to become extinct. How to live in this world? Here the basic tenants of Buddhism, of not being attached to anything, apply, but these must be tempered against the human instinct to take everything that it can — what gave rise to the Republic.

> *"…the truth, which is old as history itself, that law, in its essence, is bound to be transgressed."*
>
> *Albert Camus (1913-1960)*

Something in the air, her spiritual fervor, maybe her new vulnerability, roused Ben's sympathies. These steamy

human affairs! His innocence had me perplexed. It was almost heroic, often muddling things and obstructing a clear process of war. Zosha's foul mouth, pressed to Ben's ear, filled the gentle beast with ideas that sank deep into the slug residues. Blind, I began to hear her mind at work behind his thoughts.

"What the Hell's going on with you two? You and Shorty need to quit ganging up on her."

"Did you hear those yipping noises last night?"

A perfect pawn, his eyes changed fundamentally, carrying more and more of her hunger for conquest. He began to flicker and scowl at me from across the cell, to stink of sulfur. The moist air shorted between them in a convection of lust. They laughed together, quietly bore the radiance of the beginning stages of rapture. He testified that nothing would happen, naively grinned from his sticky web. He foreswore masturbation or any sort of release. Constricted, plagued with wet dreams, his enormous blue cock laid drearily on his belly.

"The greatest poetry is immoral…"

William Blake (1757-1827)

We hadn't been down more than a few minutes when all the foreign monks were called out into the rain to move a

pile of broken concrete on the edge of the courtyard. Like all of our projects with the Korean side, it couldn't wait until better conditions appeared. I got Ben out of bed and soaked down a coffee while loitering around the bathrooms.

When I made my appearance everyone was already soaked, caked with mud. They toiled in the humectant air as if possessed. Sweat and rain channeled down their ass cracks, lubricated their undulating limbs. They flapped through the aquatic environment with softened skin furrowed in muddy streaks, plastered over with grey undershirts. The pile of rubble disappeared quickly under their greedy, clawing hands.

Afterward the extraordinary and grim men-fish crowded into the shower—a school of salmon swimming against the current, breathing cold spray mixed with oxygen and foamy suds. Their pale skin glistened, with hairy backs and splayed toes, in an indiscernible mass. Limpid, cool flesh, freshly scoured, was blanketed in clean grey cotton that only drew more moisture from the liquid air and hung heavily on their sore backs.

I had a few hours free so I walked out to enjoy the rain. With no one around I easily passed through the gate. I fought through the stinging blast for endless blocks. My umbrella began leaking through the top, the splashing

puddles worked at me from beneath. I skulked into a brightly lit store near Suyu market like a creature from the depths. The two cuties behind the counter wouldn't stop giggling. Finally they called a man out of the back. He laughed along with them, and went back to his magazine. I loaded the counter with chocolate, suddenly caught by the clerk's finger, which flexed through the plasmic air, arced in stroboscopic brain waves, forced me to focus intently as it reached her mouth. I trembled! The gesture breached all levels, brought down the subconscious fury in a sinuous melding, cut through this and that, manifested the entirety of our story and the infinite possibilities, questions — a welcoming appreciation, the recognition of a suitable mate; the pleasures of intimacy and the soft, enveloping fragrances; the pull against the living flesh, scraping with feathery talons that clasped together emptily as I disappeared into the dismal black hole. I walked through the bleak halogen torrent without once forgetting her, her power over me, and the pleasure of being selected.

The next day Ben and I found an old roof tile in the trash. Men are often captured by useless things, a trait that can't be linked to any species of gorilla or fish. Xui, at least half male, had Ben hold it out for her so she could get a good swing at it. I remember clearly her arm darting from her

side, tiny and fast, and the ruined tile falling from Ben's hands. The next day she had her wrist wrapped in gauze, thinly covering a large bruise. We carried heavy trays to the funeral hall several times a day. She told me she wasn't able to do anything physically demanding, but, being a man of labor, I just couldn't figure it out.

"You've got to help us or the Korean's are going to throw you out. I told them you'd start working the funerals soon."

Halfway across the yard she fell to the ground, still clutching the tray. Furious with me, it took some time before I could pry it loose.

"I told you! I have a problem with my hand!"

As I looked up from her side, Zosha stared down on us from the funeral hall, snickering. What a strange bird! Damned as I was, we worked together constantly, had every meal together. We lashed out at each other, acutely aware of each other's presence. She began banging the pots and pans in the kitchen. We were like a young married couple giving each other the treatment, only I had no love in my heart, and very little patience.

Ben was inevitably caught in the drain, sucked tight against the strainer, limp as an old piece of cabbage. It was intolerable! White hot souls on the brink of madness, bursts of incoherence, volleys of dishes and silver-

ware tossed from one end of the kitchen to the other; he waded through the oily suds in his slave pants holding his stomach for the wrenching spin. He thought I was temperamental and cruel, which was true enough, but I was in the trenches and had to look out for myself.

Ben and Xui pushed each other to outbursts of rage. Zosha cackled over the top, amused by the movement of her pawn against the bitch queen. Xui was in such a state of anguish from the constant prodding that she turned serene. Just as it began to look promising, some complications arose with her visa.

"This will be difficult to fix. I have to leave."

To make up for the loss, Zosha ramped up her frightful experiments with Ben. He fused with her in such a primal way that his face began to reflect hers. Our relations were strained to the point of tossing grenades. Still, we had no trouble living together (though his shaving mirror hung crookedly on the wall). We were pressed to move into a storeroom underneath the funeral hall. It was damp, cluttered with broken lockers and piles of boxes and discarded appliances. The wallpaper, pock-marked with mildew and rot, buckled and curled off the wall. We spent a whole day cleaning it out and moving our things in.

After five days of steady rain, the heaviest Seoul had seen in eighty years, fungus and mold fanned down the wall.

All of my bedding was eaten through. Everything stank of old, musty canvas. The floor and walls perspired as if they were alive. The mold and gathering insects did their work on Ben, who packed his things and left for the main hall. I moved near the window. Open to the courtyard, it vibrated with the sounds of temple life: the ringing bell of the cash register, the scuffle of women's shoes — a cage-cell patrolled by beautiful savages, whose keen interest in my queer habits had them flocking in droves, whose children squawked and stared, and peed in tiny arcs in the sand.

The rain picked up again. Every face radiated an external depression, an inside-out pressure, weariness. The dismal light, diffused and directionless, turned everything neutral but strangely glistening, as if illumed from within: a spectral hell. The sky fell through. The moon, in its decline, driveled in a fusillade of veins, followed underneath by a multitude of channels fed by the sloping terrace. An array of volleys gushed like springs from the stone walls. Rivers coursed down the marble steps, bubbled and surged into the courtyard: a lake of sand-drifts with layers of sediment and washed stone, of tides and eddies, and the collapsing footprints of those who dared cross.

The stream boiled and frothed over behind the dam,

creating a new island, which rose to fill the pond. Streams burst from under the filthy rocks with enough force that all the trash, the empty cans and bottles and cigarette butts, even the blackened earth was swept away, leaving a fresh bed of sand. The barbed-wire tore out beneath it, allowing me to escape the temple grounds and loiter unchecked in the hissing, churning bed of the stream.

When it finally calmed the forest blossomed in profuse glory: pink and green and crawling with life; a drunken fairy's nest. Children screamed and laughed. An off-key chorus sang out, collided with the tinkling stream and the spring wind heavy with cherry blossoms. Every tree and shrub had a barrage of green out, masking the cold, grey ridge; an almost forgotten radiance. The pungent breeze, soft, eternally prodding, firmly pressed me into place in the damp, cool leaf-rot — a flowerless, unforgiving weed.

THE TOUGH PART OF LIVING IN A MONASTIC COMMUNITY
IS THE LACK OF PRIVACY
AND THAT YOUR COMRADES ARE OFTEN DAMAGED GOODS
WHO SUFFER TREMENDOUSLY
A GRANULAR PROCESSION OF EVENTS
YOU MAY FIND COMPLETELY REASONABLE
"AH, THIS DHARMA OF THUSNESS
UNTIL NOW SO FEW PEOPLE HAVE COME TO UNDERSTAND IT
THAT IT IS WRITTEN: 'IN THIS WORLD, HOW FEW ARE THEY
WHO LOSE THEIR EGOS!' AS FOR THOSE PEOPLE
WHO SEEK TO GRASP IT
THROUGH THE APPLICATION OF SOME PARTICULAR PRINCIPLE
OR BY CREATING A SPECIAL ENVIRONMENT
OR THROUGH SOME SCRIPTURE, OR DOCTRINE
OR AGE, OR TIME, OR NAME, OR WORD, OR THROUGH THEIR SIX SENSES
HOW DO THEY DIFFER FROM WOODEN DOLLS?"
HUANG PO (?-849)

A STRONG EGO, WHICH GOES ALONG WITH
REACTING STRONGLY TO WHATEVER IS PERCEIVED AS A THREAT
SUFFERS GREATLY, CAUSES NO END OF CHALLENGES
AND THERE ARE THOSE WHO'RE LURED
BY WHATEVER LUSTER THEY'VE PUT TOGETHER
FROM THE BULLSHIT TEXT
THESE NEAR APES BEAT AROUND THE RANKS
WITH THEIR MIGHTY ASPIRATIONS
OFTEN TORMENTING OTHERS
COMPETING WITH THEM FOR ANY NUMBER OF THINGS
STILL, WITHOUT THE NOISE OF HUMANITY
THE TRAINING WOULD BE FAR LESS EFFECTIVE
EVERYTHING ELSE IS JUST A MATTER OF ENDURANCE
HOW HARD CAN IT BE TO DELIVER A PLATTER OF COOKIES
TO A FUNERAL CEREMONY? A THOUSAND?

eleven. **LEAP YEAR**

It was a surreal moment — the mass of pedestrians, the pre-70's occidental buildings, the black government cars with heavy tinted windows, the barking PA and flaring lights — as if we were waiting for tear gas and rubber bullets. The bullets never came. Instead a number of small cannons were wheeled out. Strange hoover-chrome machines, they exploded in unison as the crowd counted to one. There was a flash, ribbons of silver and gold mylar spewed out over the startled assemblage.

Pressed to attend another event, we'd just made it out of the rush-hour subway; a solid hour of changing lines and wandering the cavernous underground to city hall. In the center of the square, surrounded by 5-lanes of traffic, stood an enormous pink lotus, two-stories tall. It was fronted by

chorus girls in their show dresses. A few roadies in concert shirts were still laying cable as the PA crackled and squealed to life. A Korean monk grabbed the mic and addressed the surging traffic and vacant office windows.

We eventually crossed the highway and fell into a flock of young nuns. A stout figure, the abbess, pointed to Tibor.

"No chewing gum!"

I was impressed with her keen eye, as he'd hardly moved his mouth. He kept chewing, but kept it quiet. A busload of Korean kids followed in white robes tied with yellow and red ribbons, armed with double-sided drums. They took over the 5-lane behind the chorus girls, barricaded by a police line. Camera crews wheeled in with their blazing lights as the important officials arrived, and shuffled to a long table in front of us. The chorus girls hit the last note, the drums ending in a sweaty flourish under the flash and glam of the KBC.

As the cannons blasted confetti over us, the white-gloved officials hit a row of switches on the table and the giant lotus sparked to life. The monks began chanting and circumambulating through the blinding flashbulbs. The crowd, drawn to us, pressed us tight against the glowing pink, into the mirror black lenses, into the living rooms of the Korean nation.

Soon after the haengjas were sent to a tryout for the kyoruk (lit. *learning bridge*), the boot camp for monastics, both a method of weeding out the chaff and an indoctrination into the order. Only a handful of foreigners had attempted it, none of the Zen masters or teachers. It was a new challenge unknown to the West.

Through the gate with Zosha in the lead, all of us with our hands clasped in front; the day was overcast, factory grey, tinged brown. The city's rude, tarnished storefronts, the stacks of condominiums with junk piled high against the windows, a desolate showcase. Seoul reflected the tone of the sky in concrete banality. When the sun finally burned through it was strange to see the slanting, mercurial rays, as if the impenetrable gloom were the true color.

The flowers glistened in the rain, perpetually gyrating in transparent silk. Down into the subway, into the mental projections and glancing intrusions of passion clearly reflected in the smudged plexiglass. Worse the steps up to the street, assaulted by the slow ascent of firm and tender loins. Zosha remained a few paces ahead, her stiff movements putting everything in sharp-edged focus.

The tryout was packed with sweaty Korean youth. The only foreigners, we sat on the bare floor, with no cushion of any kind, for eight full hours. We were only required to listen, but how difficult! Because we were foreigners

we weren't expected to understand the intricacies of their form. Everyone in rapt attention, I could only search their faces for some inclination of what was going on and grind through the hours of heavy pain on the floor. Hot steam blasted from my knees. A cold, numb feeling in the seat; I was pushed to the limit of what I could endure.

We lined up for the formal lunch. Wonderful to stand again, but we were quickly returned to the floor. Four steel bowls sat coldly in front of me for an hour before the lecture was done. All I wanted was to return to my numbered spot on the floor, as if it would've been more comfortable!

We ate quickly, darting glances at each other. Everyone seemed to be making outrageous mistakes, so I relaxed and shoved down the rice. Afterward we stood in line, our feet pressed tightly together, waiting for the signal to file back into the chamber.

A short nun with severe features swam in and out of focus for hours. All comforting gestures, she smiled broadly and spoke in a soft, honeyed drone. She helped me several times when I was lost, touched me with calm efficiency, turned my books upright and to the right page, in and out with the privilege of the master over a slave.

The speeches wore on, their heads floating above the podium as the rain pounded outside. The light flickered

and spat until finally, at five sharp, the power went out. The short nun rustled in the dark, lit only by two feeble candles on the altar. She tapped the dead mic fruitlessly, quieted by the hand of God.

The next day the clouds parted momentarily as the courtyard filled with crashing cymbals and drums and one bright, tiny trumpet that soared overhead in acid jazz inflections. An endless line of bosalnims with bundles of folded paper on their heads snaked out of the main hall, led by the spitting trumpet. They wound through the courtyard, spiraling around and back in a colorful pageant. The bundles were a large sheet of paper, carefully folded and tied, meant to cover their bodies during their own funerals. I walked among them with a basket of white linen, on the way to the laundry.

The chorus girls wore white instead of the usual pink. White, the bright death of Asia: a glamour, a childlike softness. They passed me on the stairs, had me trapped on the landing as they squeezed past. Girlish laughter, flashing eyes, their hands hurried to cover bosoms that showed through a meager layer of white, a white that seemed unnatural on their olive skin.

The banners, flags, and bundles of cut paper streamers that filled the courtyard were piled over a rack of old pipes and burned in a choking blaze. The trumpeting monk

cut through the smoke, surrounded by a field of followers clutching their burial papers in the fading light. A slave moon, turned fiercely round, filtered over the dispersing crowd. The moon, matriarch of time in the East, had given us a leap year. It was the reason for the ceremony, but more…

I was called to the office. The secretary shuffled papers in the back. When he noticed I'd taken a seat on the couch, he stopped and joined me. He was a good man, always laughing. And he had a beautiful young assistant with smooth lips. I'd usually draw near her face to better examine their soft texture. She'd speak as if nothing peculiar were occurring, though her face would flush as the distance between us narrowed to a paltry few inches.

The bus driver came in with a moist ear of corn, which had just come into season. He presented it to my friend in some sort of pagan mating ritual. She took a few small bites and gave it to me. At the time I had no idea of the significance of this delicate unfolding-of-the-flower, but read it plainly enough on the face of the bus driver, who began scowling and was short with me from then on. I took the corn out to the forest and devoured it in private like a simple beast.

A young monk tracked me down with a note from the secretary. He grabbed me by the shoulder.

"Is it good? Yes? ...Sir… I'm *sorry*… because of the leap year, an extra month is added to your haengja training."

Low, the ground — prone. The damned moon! And just as I'd fallen to my knees for the glory of the final few weeks.

> *"The horizon was burning with sulfur and phosphorus. It was there I was bound."*
>
> *Samuel Beckett (1906-1989)*

Buddha's birthday. A large, open tent was set near the gate, filled with a cheery band of bosalnims. Endless bowls of rice and cabbage soup, they served everyone who came, 10,000 before the day was done. It seemed the whole of Korea passed through the gate: a colorful stream of cab drivers and rock stars, tiny ones riding on shoulders, beautiful starlets, middle-aged mothers, grandmas, nieces, aunts, sisters — a mighty wave of feminine power that nearly carried us aloft.

The haengjas were in the kitchen all day with the dishes. The work was grueling and fast paced, and fun. I gave Ben the hose and told him to head for the sink. Before he'd taken two steps I yelled, "Get it hot!" and opened the valve. The hose stiffened like an oily snake, spat wildly across the floor while he struggled to capture it.

Through the maze of steel islands piled high with dishes, plastic strainers filled with greens, rice soaking in tubs, I carried baskets of bowls to the tent outside — back and forth through the crowd in a full-length plastic apron. The lanterns filled the courtyard, strung overhead on wires, the sky blotted out with pink. A large painting of Buddha, hundreds of years old, stood in the center. Thousands of lanterns with candles burning flanked him on all sides, with platters of fruit on the altar in front, and every altar in the monastery.

As the day softened the haengjas were left stumbling, holding their heads in agony. I put my shoulder to the wall and watched the monks filtering out through the gate, the courtyard aflame with the soft glow of colored paper and candlelit lanterns; a rare moment of peace. I paced the grounds as it quieted, in the grip of a strange mood. I hid briefly behind the funeral hall, transfixed by the decaying yellow paint. Damp, dark underneath, the wall striped with nail holes and strings of white fungus, the smell of the rotted wood catapulted me into my childhood, where time was an endless chore and walls with rotten paint bore a lazy sort of scrutiny…

A cypress tree bent over a dead creek in a moldering doom. The stagnant pool, nearly black, swarmed with mosquitoes; the noise of the insects deafening, my heart

in my ears with all of their bites. The forest floor was covered with layer upon layer of moldy leaves under a canopy so tight it was always dim underneath. Out in the fields a beautiful decay to the evening light.

Those fields of my youth! After a storm they were covered in a sheet of steel, the grey sky roiling above, the darkness so poignant; such a sense of foreboding. If there's such a thing as the mood of a place, it was one of unrelenting power. No matter what else, you'd always end somewhere alone, in a near trancelike state, clinging to an old tree or root, repeating whatever images that came to mind over and over. An organic process born out of the wading pools, sacred, timeless. There was a delight in the simplest things, the way everything looked under clear rainwater, the way tiny streams formed over sticks and berms.

I remembered more, many days of my youth, more simple, with me alone with a tree in the sun or a trail through the woods, where the Absolute penetrated through in a completely natural way. I'd never thought of it before, that there was some understanding initially that was lost to the turmoil of life.

"Understanding comes naturally. You don't have to make any effort."

Bodhidharma (440-528)

There was something familiar where I stood. The backside of a building is a lot like an abandoned field. No one goes there, so the wild spirit of the place crests and breaks into a rapture of its own.

The air freshened, cooled, became charged with static. The seasons were changing. The next day the sun broke free, shining silver and gold, gleaming in a white sky of autumn clouds. The rat nest stirred to a fever pitch. Shorty was inspired. He threw a handful of water at one of the monks in the shower. They began shouting, shuffling around the slippery tiles, cold cocks swinging like pendulums, bleary eyes narrowed to get that look, that swaggering machismo that glanced off the fogged mirrors as they circled the drain. Damian stepped in and grabbed him, but it was too late — the last wild breach of order. He'd got into a number of fights since arriving in Korea. The same old problem. Finally the Patriarch called him to his room.

"If you don't act correctly, I'll send you away to a martial arts temple in the mountains, OK?!"

Shorty slumped down behind the tinted window of the Patriarch's black sedan, refusing to look up. The car slowly

backed out, and was gone. Neither of us had any emotion. It wasn't a time to dwell on things. I wasn't living a life to be remembered, not saving any of it; a life constantly moving, of everything lost. The path required a different relation to things, the way nature absolves her creations with perfect equanimity, vacuity. An aggressive push forward, certainly, but the object on the stage is of no intrinsic value. If so, how can the noble human mind resolve itself, so wonderfully burning with its brief time in the sun? I'm amazed each time an arm is raised. But I wouldn't say that humanity itself is noble, the nobility lies far deeper: what drives it, what causes the cells to form, the miracle of life in its unfathomable complexity.

"Human life has no meaning."
Zen Master Seung Sahn (1927-2004)

This phrase became the sharp-pointed needle to which everything after was strung. A phrase of one's undoing — so far reaching, so defining, that I've come to hold it close, as a wadu (lit. *head of the word*). If you understand this term there's no need to prattle on.

The final few days passed so quickly I can only recall the farewell. The haengjas seemed put out, as if we were deserting them. Sometimes a hole was left that could never

be papered over, no matter how many lives. The mystery of the departure would hang overhead like a broken trust; the climate itself would have to be reinvented. Having witnessed a thousand souls lost to the boundless highway, I could only talk of other things.

HOW TO PENETRATE THE GREAT MATTER?
IF YOU THINK IT CAN BE FERRETED OUT BY YOUR EXERTIONS ALONE
THEN COME OUT WITH IT!
TO WORK THE SWORD TO A FINE EDGE A STONE IS REQUIRED
AND A GREAT DEAL OF HEAT
THE ZEN MONASTERY IS A NATURAL DEVELOPMENT OF THIS NEED
IF IT WERE EASY THERE WOULD BE
NO MORE CONFLICT, NO HUNGER, NO WAR
UNFORTUNATELY, THE DIRECT REALIZATION OF OUR TRUE NATURE
IS NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE
THERE CAN BE NO GREATER CHALLENGE
I WOULD SUGGEST A WILLINGNESS TO ACCEPT ANY NUMBER OF TRIALS
ANY AMOUNT OF SACRIFICE
OR ELSE WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT HERE?
TO PUSH YOURSELF TO THE POINT OF DISSOLUTION
IS VERY MUCH IN ACCORD WITH THE TEACHINGS OF BUDDHA
HUI NENG ATTAINED ENLIGHTENMENT THROUGH HIS TRIALS ALONE
WITHOUT ENTERING INTO FORMAL PRACTICE
ARTISTS APPROACH IT, ATHLETES, SOLDIERS, MATHEMATICIANS
IT'S NOT SOMETHING RELIGIOUS THAT MUST BE INCULCATED
RATHER THE MIND GRADUALLY CULTIVATED
IT WAS BECAUSE OF THIS THAT I ACCEPTED THE HARDSHIP
OF HAENGJA TRAINING, AND FOR IT THE COURSE OF MY LIFE
WAS PROFOUNDLY ALTERED
IN SOME WAY I FEEL I WAS PUSHED TOO FAR
THE TRAINING CAN BE SO OVERWHELMING
THAT THE WILL IS BROKEN
AND THE MONASTERY BECOMES A NECESSITY
PERHAPS THIS IS OK FOR SOME
BUT THERE ARE FEW HIGH-LEVEL MONKS
SO IT CAN BE A SERIES OF TRYING RELATIONSHIPS
WITH OFTEN INORDINATE DEMANDS

twelve. **KYORUK**

I was an ant. A hundred-sixty men swarmed the big hall. Everyone wore the same leggings, the poofed-knee trousers, in forty shades of brown. I was grabbed at and pushed, leaned on, pressed against, all of us packed into a waiting room hardly big enough to hold half our number.

The fully ordained monks, or *bikkus*, filed through. They gave us forms to fill out, in Korean. Seven of them came to check on me. They patted me on the back and tried to reason with me. One of them finally turned the sheet over and told me to write an essay.

"Why you want to be — monk?"

I don't remember what I wrote. I know I didn't have a feel for it. If you look plainly at the example of the Buddha, he left everything behind and kept on until he attained

enlightenment. There are those who insist that you can't understand Buddhism unless you study the sutras and wear the brown, crimson, black, grey, or golden robes. Certainly it's more productive to be in a community setting, to work together with other people, but the institution doesn't guarantee enlightenment, or provide many examples. And Zen has yet to adapt to Western society. There are still many facets that are cultural, so one must become a Korean in order to be successful at it, and to become a Korean is a difficult thing.

The day began cross-legged on the same yellow floor, the same snarl of aching joints and numbness, the same relentless pain as the tryouts. The only difference was that we were naked. Arms raised, everyone frail — skinny legs, narrow backs, smooth and hairless — they checked for scars, tattoos, searched our bags, our pockets, took all of our things and dumped them in large boxes. We kept only a few changes of clothes, our bedrolls, and a toothbrush. Afterward we faced a panel of four judges in succession. They tried to be stern with me, but, with no translator, we could only nod back and forth.

"Kyoruk — *difficult*…"

A camera crew lit up the hall, shoved their lenses at me. A target for anyone walking down the line, I was pestered into a corner. Korea seduced me with her endless

fascination of the Western male, although the extent of it was unnerving.

The panel of judges continued to examine each haengja in turn, a process that stretched on into the evening. The windows blackened above the hard floor, the cool air chiding, biting. It seemed impossible that at some point it would all be over. I'd worn the slave costume for too long. I'd forgotten what the outer world was like. The training is very effective.

We lined up in formation a dozen times an hour, sat on the cruel floor through the worst moments of pain I can remember. When the last of them finally made it through, I fell on my thin blanket, unconscious as soon as I hit the floor.

The next day began at 3AM. Dark, the room was lit by feeble fluorescents in a tone so dreary it always felt like rain. Shafts of light cut through at odd moments, felt more than seen. Even so you could feel the sun pass its zenith, with a great feeling of relief on the floor — the rage of midday dispelled, a fit of madness gone.

It was the yellow floor that illumed the room, as if the sun were shining underneath lumps of tallow, each precisely placed a yard apart. We slept in the same spot, nearly touching. We stretched and walked around in the few minutes between lectures, but the floor was never taken

away from us, and it was used mercilessly. The only way through was to give in. I switched positions every few minutes. The pain was so great I thought my heart would stop. I was left with nothing more than a spasming foot, but it left me frightened of what I must endure.

A few bikkus paced the ranks with long sticks carried over their shoulders. They used them to tap legs into alignment, or to rattle us awake. If I fell asleep I got the stick, but listening to hours of their lectures shoved me to the brink. I swam from near unconsciousness to a wary attention to the stick wielders, who stepped out of the shadows as soon as my eyes narrowed. One way or another I had to pull myself out of the black. It was the whole of my training, to endure. I fell asleep a dozen times an hour, for seconds only — not enough to let the muscles go slack. I often found myself writing notes with eyes nearly closed, words and sentences coming out in dream fragments, occasional lines and smudges on the page when I'd blink out.

The lectures began with all of us on our knees. When the teacher made his entrance we'd prostrate three times, and back to our knees. At some point he'd tell us to "get comfortable," meaning to sit cross-legged, but sometimes he'd forget, or something more sinister, and we'd be trapped in that painful position until one of the bikkus intervened.

I let myself sink into it one morning, forced to hold a kneeling pose for far too long with an old monk leaning on the microphone. I writhed in place for an endless time, wrenching, wringing my hands, nearly moaning out loud. I made it through, but a hollow victory, for the next lecture had me back on my knees, feeling the pain welling up again — out of juice, unable to bear it, and doing it anyway.

One of the haengjas nudged me in the storeroom. He whispered to me in thick Australian English, "There's problem… your eating."

He was a native Korean who'd spent several years abroad as a bush pilot. Big and dark skinned, he sliced through the ranks like a linebacker. He was always fooling around behind the scenes, a friend to everyone.

We had only two meals a day, breakfast and lunch. They were both formal. There was no time to shove down a good portion, so I put the rice in with the rest. The bikkus were outraged. No mixing allowed! The rules were very strict about this. Everything had to be eaten separately, with the bowl held over the mouth to conceal it. The rice was so bland I could only get down a small amount, but the miso soup, a wonderful stock from the bean mash loaves that wintered under the eaves of Korea, saved me time and again. Even stripped down to only broth and

cabbage, it was delicious.

My etiquette improved, so the bikkus moved Songwon beside me. He was the only one who spoke more than a few words of English. He straightened out all the things I was doing wrong and translated the important announcements (very few were important). I enjoyed him immensely. He helped bring the rest of the haengjas into my world. Despite the torturous conditions, it was a warm community of souls.

"Think of anything but rice."

He went over some of the finer points with me. We were instructed to attend one-month classes twice a year for the next four years, in-between winter and summer kyolches. I made a mental note to see how things were going back in the States.

On the fourth day we marched over to the shower in military fashion. As we moved from place to place each row formed a line, then waited for permission to move. We couldn't walk anywhere unless in a group of three or more, often causing a hundred men to crowd the latrine — survival of the fittest.

The floor was packed with squirming haengjas splashing tubs of water over their heads, a hundred-sixty men in near panic; a Korean centipede of wiry, meatless bodies bathing each other at top speed. I found a razor in a

soap dish, but it belonged to the old monk above it, who made it plain whose razor it was. I grabbed a small tub and crouched down, barely touched a discarded razor to my head before a haengja flung himself at me. I never saw his face. As I stood up to find a mirror, someone else offered to do me. I apologized, as he seemed put out, and fished my way between a dozen buttocks. Everyone was bent over at the waist jamming their asses out and looking for someone to shave — a good bunch.

I found a spare shower next to a mirror, with several haengjas beneath it. A shady face greeted me. Four days growth gave me the look that caused so many delightful problems back home. I sighed, and shaved it off.

After the first week all the boys began to writhe in place. We were all in agony. I was the worst, with one knee sticking out, covered in a heavy sweat, with salt streaks everywhere. Our torment had everyone toeing the line, not a renegade in sight. They had our attention.

The latrine collected a troop of haengjas on the side facing stream. It was the only place out of view of the bikkus. I was left there a few times a day after following my line. I never knew where they were going! Every day a flock of them would gather around, the braver ones at the front.

I enjoyed playing a small part in their society, though I

often had to convince them that I couldn't speak Korean. It was hard for them to fathom. How could I survive without understanding the lectures?

Songwon remarked, "It's as if the heart's been ripped out!"

One by one I spoke with every one of them behind that latrine, standing in the sun for our precious seconds of liberty.

Along with the daily lectures we did three long programs of sutra chanting. I was often stuck on my knees listening to the rest of them. I didn't know most of the chants, and the ones that were familiar had odd phrasing. It struck me that the sounds held a great deal of meaning to them. The history of man, when taken back a million years, eradicates dogma. The societies who were able to cultivate crops dominated, to paraphrase Jared Diamond, and slaughtered the rest. This more clearly defines the phenomenon of humanity to me, the movement of nature as it struggles against the limitations of the phenomenal world, but there were many on the floor that worshipped the text and, in one way or another, looked down on my shoddy education.

"You must study sutras before you can meditate."

I nodded. "Yes, of course…"

"The true Way is sublime. It can't be expressed in language. Of what use are scriptures? But someone who sees his own nature finds the Way, even if he can't read a word."

Bodhidharma (440-528)

Songwon was one of the few haengjas who understood me. Most of the others were scholars. He struggled with it more than me, as he understood their words. To endure another lecture was almost too much for him. It was my privilege to be excluded, to sit obediently on the floor and listen to the intonation alone. I was a good haengja in that respect.

We marched out to the courtyard just as the sun burned over the ridge. Ropes were nailed down four men wide, forming a rough square a quarter-mile around. We lined up at one end as the female haengjas trooped in, their slippers like the rustling of birds. An old monk stood at a podium in front of the main hall. He looked out solemnly over us and struck the moktak. We fell prostrate in the coarse sand, knees first, forehead pressed gently into the parting grains.

I'd tied a sock around my knees to cushion the impact. One of the younger haengjas objected, as it was against the rules. He leaned on me to the point that we were squinting at each other. I reached over and rubbed his head.

The socks stayed on.

We continued the prostrations around the square, one step at a time. The sun was full on, the sand clinging to my face, the sweat boiling out. We crossed old granite tiles, drainage grates, up and down the terrace steps on our knees.

Back in the main hall the stick fell frequently. I woke up with one tapping on the floor to goad me. I couldn't have been out for more than a second, but I'd already slumped over the notebook. I stretched my back, looked at the lecturer, and became lost in daydreams.

We pulled weeds in an old graveyard that afternoon. Not all of us, maybe fifty were selected. I always had the best jobs, such as tending Buddhist shrines "never touched by a foreign hand." I found a pretty little vine with tiny flowers to drape over my neck. The boys loved it. They were so gentle, so good natured that the slightest breach of order was bewitching to them.

Everyone caved in by the second week — the peculiar retreat face of pallor, purity, as if we were all concentrating on something important. We moved like hospital patients, even the younger ones.

The pain slackened, became routine. The routine became routine. Boredom set in, and because I wasn't left alone, I couldn't get comfortable. I looked around at all

the faces in rapt attention. A whole world escaped me.

After the graveyard ten of us were sent to the library: a small, windowless hall full of long tables and musty old books. We sank into the chairs the first day, not doing much. The librarian, a young monk, very kind and gracious, pulled out a few cartons of milk and passed them around.

The next day he brought out stacks of ledgers. We were to track down the books and make a record of what we found. Since I couldn't read the characters, I paced back and forth, sat in chairs, looked through encyclopedias, magazines. All ten of us crowded together on the couch for a milk break at the end, everyone talking full blast, with me jammed in the middle.

Outside the haengjas bathed and shaved in the stream. The ten of us from the library were the only ones with uncut hair, which made us seem a bit roguish, which gave us a few moments in the shower the next morning. I hadn't had a hot shower in five long days. We found a few dull razors and had just set to work when Jinho stormed in. He'd overseen the tests I attended in Seoul. He always had a bad night of sleep, crumpled, caved in look. He'd enter whatever room we were in and have a dozen men standing up front.

He looked us over and told us to hurry, I suppose — it

seemed to be the sentiment. When I made it out to the yard I was half done at best, my shirt full of prickly hairs. I hadn't rinsed my back off in the panic. There was no way out of it, I certainly couldn't rinse off again. Those nasty little hairs bothered me interminably until, hours later, the line finally returned to the stream.

After lunch Jinho entered the storeroom. The day before he'd busted at least a dozen who'd strayed into the latrine between lectures. I escaped by chance, caught in a line that led somewhere else. The storeroom was the only place where you could sneak a few moments on your back. We hung our laundry there on the exposed electric lines. It wasn't 100%, but nobody cared. Jinho made it clear that anyone caught resting would be sorry. Of course I was unaware of this. After lunch we were sent to the stream to wash our bowl cloths. Jinho made his move, knowing that some of the boys would skip the housekeeping and try to find a dark corner. Songwon jumped up on a premonition, practically brushing shoulders with him. The rest of the haengjas still on the floor were made to stand in front of the class, then sent to an empty room to await further punishment. I secretly hoped he'd give them a few good lashings.

Each mistake earned a point. Those who had three or more stayed up after hours doing prostrations. Some had

as many as nine points, which translated to a thousand prostrations. More than fifteen and you were out.

My name was called, but not regarding points. I hadn't penciled a number on my shoes. It was how they kept track of us. I received two points for crossing the yard without having my hands clasped together. A bikku complained that I wasn't paying attention to the lectures. When I explained (how could he not have known?) that I didn't understand Korean he paused, sighed, and continued down the line. I felt betrayed. The room seemed to spit me out, but in a matter of hours I was reabsorbed. The boys couldn't keep away from me. A string of farts rose out of their tortured asses, a tangible reminder that some retaliation could be expected. The bikkus couldn't help smiling now and then. It was obvious they loved their boys and were only putting us to the test to weed out the chaff.

We passed the midway point and limped into the last week, but the tightened harness robbed us of any elation. One boy, startled by the tug of the rope, fled in the night. Thirty-six had disappeared since the beginning. There was nothing to do but stick it out. Solace in the brave hearts that surrounded me, and my lines drawn on the wall to mark the passage of time. My bowels locked down tight. After two weeks of shoving down rice and

peering between my legs into an empty porcelain bowl, pressing and squeezing, changing my footing, massaging my stomach, finally I produced a ridiculous twisted thing no bigger than a pencil. Dry and light, it broke apart in the struggle and flew over the rim.

At the mirror in a lysergic trance, thin, fatigued, sunburnt, the circles under my eyes were darker than usual, my complexion sallow, my posture out of line. It was disheartening. Kyoruk stripped me of everything other than the will to survive, and I would've died willingly. I faced every lecture with a heavy heart, waiting it out, blinking out, switching positions every few minutes. The endless time on the floor began to form calluses along both legs; all feeling drained from me. Nearly dead, I moved my mouth mechanically, like a puppet. I chewed my tasteless rice and shit pencils. I could not be stopped.

Outside we lined up for a lecture at the nun's temple a half-mile downstream. No time to stop at the latrine, I stepped in place near the end and watched the long line snake ahead, every head the same color, every shoe the same glowing white.

As we turned into the courtyard, Jinho crouched down to tease a cat with a stick. He looked at me and started cackling about something, but I was through the door and buried in the ranks.

Songwon's teacher got up to speak; a thin old man with a withered voice. He kept stretching the line of his mouth, looking back and forth over us with a movement as predictable as an electric fan. I could see some sweetness in him. He seemed to have everyone's attention. A young monk, nearly hysterical, made us repeat phrases after him, with the speakers ringing near feedback for a solid hour. We fell in along the square, a sea of dark faces surrounding me. I beamed from my position in line, pleased to be out of the hall. On our knees in the dirt, we crawled past the eight dragon pool and onto the granite terrace.

I didn't have a sock tied around my knees. By that time most of us had something rigged, but I wanted to be on the righteous path. It was a damp morning of the new moon, the sun buried behind a pleasant, heavy fog. I set my knees carefully on the tiles as the boy in back rammed his head into me. We inched around the block and limped back to the main hall. One of the larger ones straggled behind. He pulled his pants down and showed his knees, swollen and red, nearly purple in the center, with missing skin in patches and a shiny appearance. The bikkus made a big show of letting him lay off prostrations for awhile. He wouldn't have made it otherwise. Because of it we all got a break. We hit the shower and did our laundry in the stream. By the time everyone made it back to the

main hall it was time for the midday hour of chanting. No morning lectures! The heated floor had us all yawning. They brought out a special new-moon rice, cooked with beans and pine nuts. Magnificent! We ate like kings, and slammed into another series of lectures — never a lapse in the schedule. The bikkus questioned the audience at random, calling out numbers, having us stand and sing a hymn, or recite something from the lectures. I was nervous that my number would be called, but mine was crossed out from the beginning. A shy kid beside me was summoned to the front. Everyone laughed as he fumbled with the microphone and butter fingered the moktak, but when he started chanting everyone got quiet. He had a voice, deep and resonate with an edgy vibrancy, a chilling huskiness, that had us all a little misty eyed. He was radiant as he paced the hall. He warmed our hearts, rallied us from dwelling in our own miseries. Nobody wanted to get up after him.

The clouds rolled in — truant sun — every face reflected the absence of light. A dim focus on the things around me: a crease on the floor, a dusty old column, the brown cloth stretched tight to my knee. I stared at nothing, blinking, digesting. A day could pass so slowly, leaving a man crushed under its weight. I looked in agony at my lines on the wall, their number meaningless.

The next day, after circling the courtyard, we were led out the gate and down to the graveyard. The people scattered on the road couldn't take their eyes off us. An impressive sight, with our hands clasped in front, our eyes to the ground, we trooped onto the grass, filed out among the gravestones. As we staggered past the old monuments, a grim army, the spectators crowded in. I could hardly keep from sinking to my knees.

Each day found new opportunities to breach the routine. Work period was the only break, our chance to move around and talk, to be active. By Wednesday of the last week it was cut out altogether. No more cushioned seats in the library, instead a two-hour lecture on chanting technique, which led to the evening chanting rounds, prostrations. We were pinned to the floor, with only a few tiny breaks, for nine and a half hours. But the end was in sight! We crowded the sinks, remembering the way it used to be, when sinks ran with hot water, and washing the face was guaranteed. I would brush my teeth on the floor, from a rubber hose jammed over one of the sink fittings. All of us used it, some even stripped naked and bathed and did their laundry on that floor, with eight shitters and urinals adding their own streams. But with the new surge of activity, I joined the haengjas outside as they bent to the stream. It was much quieter there in the gran-

ite wash, with hollows and drifts and tiny waterfalls, and a cold brace of mountain water in the dark makes a man feel something too deep to be wrung out of the subconscious: a wariness, a unity with the beasts, an undeniable sense of wellbeing. We must allow ourselves to be savage, to run naked through the trees, to swim in muddy pools, eat wild berries and mushrooms, to draw things in the dirt with a stick. Modern society is so often cut off from what it needs to understand itself, to be at ease on this earth. We have made it so difficult…

> *"…like the echo of a song over a barren waste."*
>
> *Yukio Mishima (1925-1970)*

Evening fell. The chanting rounds continued until the sky blackened, and still we faced hours of prostrations — a thousand a day on the bare floor. Mosquitoes flew in with the cool, damp air. My knees were inflamed, the calluses cracked open, the flesh swollen and red. My leggings fought back, bunched up, pinched too tightly or fell loose as the floor heaved into view; the pain suffered in silence. Night, a quiet procession to the storage room. We brought out our blankets. The cell transformed into a hospital ward. Everyone had their pants down showing off their injuries. A last short meditation period, then

lights out.

Cold, sharp morning. We lined up four abreast and marched through the gate, followed by the troop of females. Past the museum, the arched bridges, past the graveyard, the atmosphere fell in a nearly white haze. Not cloud or fog, something finer than these.

The road plunged into a pine forest strewn with boulders carved deep with calligraphies, messages of centuries past. At the outer gate we turned back and straightened the ranks, the moktak sounded, and all three-hundred of us hit the pavement at once.

We inched along, slowly finding our rhythm together. The asphalt was old and rough. The sky, blotted out, began dripping before we reached the forest. Tiny droplets bounced off the road, stirring strange smells. Hands and slippers churned them even more: colors, images, flashing half-memories of things canine, a world unknown.

We kept on, the line coming in and out of sync with the moktak, surging from the back and lashing forward, with different sections holding different rhythms, the whole of it saved by one or two near the front who refused to back down. Jinho walked back and forth along the ranks, booming at us when a row fell behind, or the chanting grew too dissonant.

The road broke apart as we turned from the forest, with

potholes that gave way to sections of crushed rock, the loose stones wedged under the knees like knife blades. We kept on. There was no resistance in us. The graveyard sprang into view, and a long stretch of soft, moist sand. The rain increased, forming puddles to slake our thirst. We were nearly laughing with relief, with the end in sight. Pressing our heads in the mud, we passed the triple gate and crept into the courtyard. The moktak sounded over a foam-flecked chant as the sky opened up, the courtyard lit by a molten blaze of flash bulbs.

Back in the main hall the crazy morning's exercise gave way to another series of lectures. Forced to remain on sore knees, the instructor spoke in monotones, finished each sentence as if it were the end, then began again. The boys huffed and shuffled front to back. A bikku wrung his hands watching us. He finally leaned over the podium and told us to get off our knees. The instructor cleared his throat, and droned on.

Songwon leaned to my ear.

"I can't take any more of this crap! Most of these guys are full of stupid ideas…"

I nodded. "I can tell by the shape of their noses."

He sighed heavily behind me when the tests came around. All of the lectures were in preparation for this, the final exam. I sat upright in the middle of the room as everyone

hunched over their tests. The bikkus walked past, ignoring me completely, but when Jinho stood over me they all collected around. He boomed a command. Songwon spun around and hurriedly pointed out where to fill in my name and number.

"Should I write an essay?"

"Don't bother."

All of them stood up together, for they'd crouched down beside me. Eventually I realized I'd passed the test. My mind seized from the intense pressures. Those three weeks encompassed more than a life. To part from those brave men seemed impossible, yet several asked if they could join me for the train ride to Seoul.

We raced through the last night on rocket wings, three thousand prostrations on the bare floor. Songwon snorted and bellowed like a bull, cleared his throat loudly, dragged the last note of the chant down in an effort to slow it down, pulled at his pants and farted long gusts. I was racked with fits of laughter just as the pain in my knees made everything dead serious.

In the morning we limped to the main hall along with the women, as pale as ghosts. Poor, bruised, nodding out five at a time, like stupid cows we stared at the empty podium for long moments. The high monks marched in finally, in exact hierarchical order to the last, who sparkled

in gold brocade. One after another they gave speeches at the podium while we kneeled in agony. When a yellow-robed monk rattled off a string of phrases to everyone's applause, Songwon turned to me.

"All the speeches are horrible, political, all repeating the same thing."

We marched out to the courtyard and were separated from the women. Back in the main hall three monks in gold brocade, with big, gnarled sticks gleaming in the spotlights, boomed from the high platform. We repeated phrases after them, prostrating, tripping over the floor length folds. The bikkus filed through with *moksha*, a flammable, resinous herb, and placed a small amount on our left forearms. Young monks followed behind with lit incense, touching off the moksha. Smoke filled the hall. The chanting rose to a thundering pitch as the coals burned into our arms. We smudged the ash into our skin, and we were monks!

I looked down the ranks of proud haengjas, many in tears, and wept along with them. I loved those boys! A few moments only and I was led to a car already packed, heated. Zosha sat across from me.

"How are you?" she asked, her voice quietly resigned.

I told her I was alright and said nothing more. In the train she slumped across from me open-mouthed; the

black glare from the window distorting the color of her face, something I shouldn't have seen. I looked past her, watched the fields and trees going by, not fully conscious of my liberty.

I walked out to a pay phone the next morning to tell my family the good news. My father was in the hospital. The doctor said he wasn't going to make it.

A cab pulled in, finally. A crowd of friends shoved money at me, their hands through the window as I pulled away. The traffic was fierce. The driver pierced through the heavy smog with a rapidly spinning meter. He threw my bags out and kept the change. The landing gear retracted noisily as Korea faded into the mud brown haze. I closed the window.

IN THE STRICTEST SENSE, WHEN YOU BECOME A MONK OR NUN
YOU BREAK ALL TIES WITH YOUR FAMILY
MY DECISION TO GIVE COMFORT AND AID TO MY FATHER
WAS AGAINST THE RULES
IT WASN'T AN EASY CHOICE TO MAKE
IT DEFINED ME AS TO HOW FAR I WOULD FOLLOW THE DOGMA
I HAD NO SENTIMENT FOR THIS, PERHAPS TO MY DETRIMENT
BUT THERE'S NO WAY TO INSTILL IN ME
A DEVOTION TO THE LAW
THAT WOULD ALLOW MY OWN TO SUFFER NEEDLESSLY
AS WITH ALL THINGS, THERE WAS AN EBB AND FLOW TO IT
AS FAR AWAY AS I HAD GONE, THE TIDE CAME IN
AND I FOUND MYSELF BACK AT THE PLACE OF MY ORIGIN
IT'S REMARKABLE THAT I WAS ABLE TO MOVE FREELY HERE
BUT THE VOWS I'D JUST TAKEN HAD NO MEANING TO ME
WHO CAN UNDERSTAND THIS?
"THE TRUE MAN OF THE WAY WHO GOES WITH CONCURRENT CAUSES
TO WIPE OUT HIS OLD KARMA
AND LET THINGS FOLLOW THEIR OWN COURSE
HE DRESSES HIMSELF AS IS FITTING
WHEN HE WANTS TO GO, HE GOES
WHEN HE WANTS TO STAY, HE STAYS
NOT EVEN FOR A FRACTION OF A MOMENT
DOES HE ASPIRE TO BUDDHAHOOD."
RINZAI (?-866)
I HAD A VERY GOOD TEACHER WHO ALWAYS TAUGHT FREEDOM
AND CARING FOR ALL BEINGS
BECAUSE OF HIS EXAMPLE I HAD NO QUALMS
ABOUT DOING WHAT WAS NECESSARY
THOUGH ONCE YOU'VE GONE TO A CERTAIN HEIGHT
THERE'S NO WAY TO FOLD THE WINGS AGAIN
YOU MUST BE FAR ALONG WITH YOUR PRACTICE TO WEATHER THIS
THAT YOU WOULD HAVE NO NEED OF OUTWARD SUPPORT
AND ARE WILLING TO DISAPPOINT A LOT OF CLOSE COMPANIONS

thirteen. **TOTEM**

Down to the subtropics of the deep South, the years fell away through the long miles, the old truck drifting past narrow, chewed roads to clear-cut fields. Pine trees flashed in skinny rows between cow pastures, soybeans. The strong yellow light streaming through towering clouds above, I felt enveloped in a dream, more of a dream than the images I carried with me — stinking, sweltering.

I met the family at the homestead, showed my legs fresh from the cruel floors of the kyoruk. They were covered in calluses their entire length, my knees swollen and red. My mother shouted and grabbed one of them to get a closer look.

"Dang! What did they do to you?"

The Mennonite community was nearly gone, assimilated piecemeal into the redneck world as their farms fell

through. The only big industry, pulpwood, grew in expanding plots that devoured the hardwood forests. Harvested extensively, acres of stumps and rotting limbs were often all that remained, burned off to further add to the desolation.

The ruined forests poured silt into the brackish creek, threatening the environment still more. Not to be outdone, my father cut down all of the big trees on his own land, but there nature sprang back — the fields grew thick with black-eyed susans, dandelions, reeds, and waist-high stalks of crabgrass. The forests, overgrown with briars, were parceled off into large blocks leased to hunting clubs, fenced in barbed wire, crawling with armed men.

My father pulled through. Newly charged with a vein from his leg, his heart sprang back to life. A red, crinkled scar ran from his neck to his foot; a thousand staples all the way down.

"They really cut me this time. Look at that!"

After a few weeks they brought him back and took the leg. They sent us a hydraulic sling to move him in and out of bed. I sat with him for awhile, watching him feel around for a scrap of food. His eyes were gone, his world narrowed to what he could hear of us from the back of the house, and what he could feel out on the bed and nightstand. He gestured to me, to the wrong side of the room.

He finally found me and grabbed me with his good arm. I was surprised how much strength he had.

"I'll be walking out of here pretty soon."

I looked out the window. "I'm sure you will."

He knew he was dying, but refused to acknowledge it, the same stubbornness that cost him his eyes and limbs. He wouldn't listen to the doctors, or monitor his insulin levels. He could've lived much longer, and without the macabre end.

I leaned over the bed. "I love you Dad."

It was strange to acknowledge him, as if I were an angel, my words cumbersome, but I would not let him die without hearing it from me. His eyes moved slightly. He refused to respond otherwise. He communicated with me subliminally. He named me after his great uncle, a hobo who rode the rails and died there, crushed underneath a train. I heard the story from my mother. My father always kept to himself, unless I made too much noise, or somehow got in the way. What I remember most were his three rules:

"Never buy a house, never buy a car, and never get married."

He was sullen, angry. I remember falling off a tricycle in the house and being dragged away by the arm. He threw the damned thing out in the yard, doused it with gas, and

set it on fire!

I can't say anything about my mother. She had her own troubled childhood. According to her, from the way she was raised, she didn't know how men were supposed to behave. It was a tough environment to grow up in. There was only the razing through the fields, the smell of the myrtle, the flight of the crow. There was no place, or reason, to stop, but for the overall feeling of the place to become ingrained in me, and with it a new layer of complexity or meaning.

To know a field of weeds I would walk through it for long periods, with no concern for time. Anyway, there was no place to go, and no end of field after field. I would walk until my legs were wooden, the smell of the wild grasses worked into my skin and hair. As an awareness of a deeper reality gradually became known, my relation to everything was permanently altered. In the early days there was a great deal of turmoil. Because there was no framework or shoulder to lean on, my environment so wild, I was something feral. A large part of it was a survival mechanism against the townsfolk who openly sought me out — to deride me. A great amount of time and energy was given to surviving the onslaught, which blessed me with a wonderfully thick skin. Of course I was drawn to the heat, but even then I found no reason to engage

them. Nature sets plenty of fires on her own. It's a privilege to stand apart, to observe the ceaseless functioning, to become aware of the underlying structure. It's this curiosity, this undying need to comprehend, that inculcates the sage, for in the bare perception the witness is made immune, to any sort of calamity — in fact is enriched by it, and adapts organically to the perception, gradually becoming aware of the underlying truths.

I consider these experiences the most important of my life, where I learned the most, where I began to unravel the mysteries, though I had no feeling for my own path that would spring out of the darkness. The immensity of the human soul! It's a mystery that I came to anything. I felt trapped by the boundaries set before me, and too self-conscious among my peers. There was no way to salvage me. Whatever I did, I believed I could never escape my origin. If I was born into an intolerable situation, I must be intolerable. If my existence was of no consequence, why not set things on fire?

My father had no flash of insight, no time to cultivate something meaningful. He was always grasping at things, and finally betrayed by them; the same for all of us — for what did we know of his yearnings? It must be unimaginably hard to come to such an end. The confused feelings I had were lost to an overbearing pity. I couldn't stay

with him long, a few sentences. I wanted to connect with him in some way, but I could find no way in. It was too late for him.

I made a pirogue in his workshop as I waited for him to stabilize. I needed a constant flow of work to keep my head together. I don't know why creative work is so nourishing for me. I don't question it anymore. I took the truck an hour north to the Kisatchie River. Drifting down the slow moving waters, dark brown, heavily scented with magnolia and dogwood, dusted with pollen and flowers strewn from overhanging vines — I was intoxicated. There were long sandbars at every bend, with tall virgin pines, oaks, and many wild trees and vines unknown to me. The creek flattened to wide sandstone shelves, the water cascading down tiny steps for a half-mile of gentle rapids. I found a spot under a golden beech tree and sank into the moist earth.

In my youth it was the high point of a day, finding a new clearing or bend in the creek. Here the dream entered life — a totem. The site was tended carefully, a trail cleared, hours spent in one spot or other, absorbing the goings on, watching the birds and squirrels, the play of light. This could be, and often was, the extent of a day, and the search for more totems when the excitement faded.

More of a mystery as I grew older, the totem became

indistinguishable from my habits and tendencies, from my own identity. There's no real difference between the movement of nature and the movement of the subconscious. One mirrors the other: the roads, maps, names, settings, aggregation of people in certain sites; the group sentiment, national perspective; the wisdom of the crowd, the dream — the same long conversation with the self, the same sort of intimacy that's Godlike in equanimity — explained in the bend of the river, the dead tree decaying on the forest floor. But we've lost our feel for nature. We dominate it, as if it were something separate. The tragic results are in the news every day. More subtle, and because of it more insidious, is the damage to our own psyche. The will is exhausted by logical design, its boundaries.

As the light began to fall a swarm of mosquitoes descended on me. I'd forgotten how bloodthirsty they were! I stumbled through the forest with the pirogue overhead. My back was covered with bites before I made it to the truck.

The money, everything I had, quickly ran out. Monk or no, I had to pay my way. There wasn't much on the job front, and what little there was had been picked clean by those who'd stayed behind. All the men of my time faced a tough choice: to leave the South in search of a career, or stay and become part of the ruined fabric, the burn-

ing pair of eyes at the back of the line. Those who stayed were shut off from the world. If not stupefied from long hours baked alive in pulpwood forests, they drove countless miles, sealed in air-conditioned trucks — to industrial plants, paper mills, refineries, oil rigs. Their spirits dimmed by the stifling conditions, their flames nearly snuffed out, they became boring, repetitive, of little use to anyone but their own clans, mistrustful of strangers.

These men respect only their own kind, or else the hero. It's easy to fathom their desperate need of one. If you were new in town you wouldn't have an easy time of it, but if you could command a room, well that's a different matter entirely. Ghosts of the revolution, formed on the dregs of a nation, the wounded pride of their fathers, the impossible conditions and meager rewards, there's a pervasive darkness, one that has no glamour. Apart from the badge of the modern cowboy, the historical loner, the rebel without a cause — misunderstood as a rule — the anger and prejudice and wounded pride of the Southern man continues on.

I finally found work at a paper mill, putting up scaffolding inside an eleven-story boiler. It was brutal stepping back into the labor pool. I carried heavy brackets up and down eleven levels of iron grate, my shoulder scraped raw, spit flying through the cracks, steam blasting out ev-

erywhere. Trucks moved constantly below with wooden benches full of men in hard hats. The air was pungent with pulp mash, the paint worn off where hands and feet had found purchase, the metal brown underneath. Steam whistles, clouds of vapor, leaking valves dripping stinging hot sulfur; everything hot to the touch. The furnace flames groaned like jet engines, as hot as the sun.

We wore harnesses inside the boiler, tied off through the open ports. I stayed near the top, passing material through pipes that hung down from the ceiling in long loops like a church organ. The inside was dark as night, with a few dim lamps strung out for us. The cavernous chamber echoed with shouts and the clang and bang of the crew hammering the scaffold together to reach us, eight stories below.

My helper was a tough little Cajun from Pitkin. He had a squinty eye; a peculiar way of moving sideways.

"You ever seen rooster's fight?"

"No… heard about it in Mexico."

"Well most places have it as far as I know."

As I drew close to hear him, I noticed a strange pattern sprayed across his cheeks.

"What happened to your face?"

"Well, one night I was cutting cross' the fields and when I got to old man Peterson's yard he pulled a shotgun on

me. I waved at him but he thought I was a coon — guess it was too dark. Man, everything was on fire!"

He *was* odd. I couldn't tell if he was a man or woman until he began talking about his wife. He flapped around the upper levels with me, jabbering about his prized roosters. We clung to the pipes and shouted through the din.

"Are you military?"

"No. I'm a Buddhist monk."

He had no ready answer for me, but his eyes spoke volumes. I was the cult member, the freak selling flowers at the airport. Word got around. Trashcan, a newly released inmate, was the next one down the line.

"You look like a mass murderer. You better not sneak in my winder.' I got it locked just in case you were wonderin.' I bet you done followed me home. You know where I live, don't you?"

"I wouldn't mess with you, Trashcan. I'd probably take one of the smaller ones."

"Yeah…" he boomed, laughing, "a knife would do me just the same. I know you want to carve me to a steak."

High on the catwalk he slammed a heavy pipe into my groin. I'd been through it before, knew what was in store if I didn't stand my ground.

I shouted back, sweat streaming down my face, "Hey, watch it!"

He tensed, drew his muscular body into a wall.

I slapped his hardhat, "Watch what you're doing."

He pawed at me viscously, knocking my hat off. I watched it fall eleven stories down and slam into the grimy soil. He waited until I looked back at him.

"Don't touch me motherfucker! I'll throw you over the side!"

The air was cool blowing through the grate. The wind whistled around my naked head, turning the sweat into a greasy mask. A party of supervisors stood nearby, caught in the spectacle.

"That's enough…"

Another month and I was the only one left. Thirty had filtered through the cracks. It wasn't that I was better than them, or stronger. I needed the money. I took what I'd saved and bought a ticket out, back to the Zen center in LA.

My father clung stubbornly to what remained of his life. Forced to stay in the hospital for long periods, his insurance was stretched to the limits. My sister pleaded with me to help with the payments. Unfortunately, in the Korean monastic system you don't work in society. If my father would have died simply, cleanly, my life would have been different. But nature doesn't fit any mold. I arranged a meeting with the Patriarch.

"My father's very sick. My sister says they'll lose the insurance policy if they can't make the payments. I need to work."

"No! If you want to help your father, go back to Korea and do a kido (lit. *chanting retreat*)."

What a difficult position! There was no one I respected more in the world than the Patriarch, but my father, obstinate, lonely, there was no hope for him. Could I turn my back on him in his hour of need? Does the Zen monk alone hold the high ground?

THE RETURN TO THE WORLD
IT CAN'T BE REASONED OUT
EITHER YOU REMAIN FOREVER ON THE OUTSKIRTS
OR SOME CONCESSIONS ARE MADE
IT'S THE CROSSROADS
THE POINT WHERE YOUR LIFE'S WORK WILL FIND PURCHASE
WHAT ARE YOU TO BE?
A SAINT? A FRIEND TO THE COMMON MAN?
WHAT MASK SUITS YOU?
THE LIFE OF A ZEN MONK WASN'T THE FREE LIFE I WAS AFTER
IT DIDN'T RESONATE WITH ME, SO WAS ONLY USEFUL TO A POINT
I HAD TO FIND MY OWN WAY AGAIN
THE FABRIC THAT HAD BEEN SO CAREFULLY WOVEN
HAD TO BE PULLED FREE OF THE LOOM
IS IT NECESSARY TO BREAK FROM THE INSTITUTION?
MANY OF THE GREAT TRADITIONS SPRANG OUT OF REVOLUTIONS
AGAINST THE ESTABLISHED ORDER
WE MUST CONCEDE AND ACCEPT OUR HUMAN TENDENCIES
THAT WE INFALLIBLY TRAMPLE THE GROUND
IN SEARCH OF POSITION, GLAMOUR, HOLINESS
TIME AND AGAIN THE WAY IS REVEALED
AN IRRESISTIBLE, CLIMACTIC MOMENT FOR HUMANITY
PROOF OF THE UNDERLYING TRUTHS
OUR CAREFUL WORK TO PROTECT IT
TO EMULATE IT
WEIGHS IT DOWN WITH THE HUMAN NEED OF APPEASEMENT
THE VERY THING WE SEEK TO GO BEYOND
THE WHOLE BUSINESS IS TIRESOME
BUT IT HAS BROUGHT YOU HERE

fourteen. **NOE'MI**

The Zen center in LA was more of a hostel, with junkies on the mend, travelers who used it as a convenience. There was little of the protestant vibe, but there was no teacher. I helped run the dharma room, managed the house and bought groceries, and continued to write, which only added more fuel to the fire. The book quickly began to dominate. The constraint of the cloth, the apathy of the residents, who had no passion for practice or any sort of deep question — there wasn't anything contradictory between me and the heavens, but that conviction was easily lost in the dull pattern of days.

Noe'mi was a welcome break in the routine. I knew only fragments of her: an exposed arm, an ass revealed in tortured spandex; a square, regal ass; an ass that spoke of long

days pressed into creaky antique furniture soaked down with lemon oil. Red orange hair cropped short, framed her face in a strange way, ridiculous. Her nose flared in the heat. She was always hot. Her eyes, small and difficult to get around, were constantly lit in a hedonistic frenzy. She squirmed like a worm on a hook, competed with me in a childish way.

"Have you ever been to South America? Of course not, you couldn't survive it! You'd be scared — to — death! You couldn't handle it! There's mercenaries everywhere; spiders as big as your hand. You sleep under mosquito netting or you'd just die; big cats run wild — you can hear them screaming at night, so many noises. You feel like something's going to steal — your — body!"

Impossible to find the ground with her. I knew something was missing; I had a thousand reasons except the right one, her manipulations masked by my desire to possess her. Something stirred in her, but I was too ripe, too sentimental… fluids lost, turned sour with turmoil; knuckles scraped from the floor, spine out of joint — delicious on the outside. She sensed something wrong about me. I was a new taste she could not resist. I mistook her lust for something more. The feeding was long and slow. My vows kept her from getting her tongue into me. The anguish! She boiled and seethed, fastened herself to me,

took me out on many occasions, paying for everything. We began to talk openly of our feelings for each other, to seek each other out during the spare moments. But every word was a cover for something undefined, perhaps nothing but a feeding instinct. I was forced to watch her body language and to work on what was underneath through clues of this sort.

She became impassive, withdrawn. For two weeks she would hardly speak with me. Flattened under the new day, full of despair and unable to shake it, finally the chill became unbearable.

"What's going on with you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

She wouldn't breathe a word inside the Zen center. It was another week before I managed a few moments with her, following behind on errands. She spoke over her shoulder, without looking back.

"We were being stupid. Indulging. You're a monk. We have to cut it."

She wavered and succumbed a dozen times after, the robes between us, lost and more denial and more. The drama unfolded in delicious layers of rot, the flame diminished, everything ludicrous—all lies and sticky limbs, sweet breath, words careening on a flimsy surface, empty desire, a game of seduction with no winner in sight, and

both of us weary for the distance.

The family's need for money only increased. The extraction, like everything else, was slow and tedious. Pulled back and forth to keep the precepts or give them back, the core became molten, spilling hot lava through my ears.

If there had been a break for me, the demands on me lessened… the Buddha had everything before entering the path, an entire kingdom. My crude upbringing yielded more a cloud of yearning, which had to be acknowledged. It was so intense that, though I had some sense of what I should do, many things from that time only make sense now, from a distance.

Noe'mi took me to a local bar. Martinis in the courtyard; she walked over and kissed me. I was aflame with the powerful musk at the back of her neck. I ran my hands over her body and felt her moist sex.

The days after were thick, haunted with memories of her.

"I could kiss you forever," she whispered.

The walk home, the brief interludes on the dark street; the night flashed like gunpowder. It was all that ever passed between us. She left for Paris soon after. I found a note under my door:

"I should never have kissed you…"

On her return she unpacked a black feather boa along with other clever devices that exist only to torment. Her squeaky fuck me voice was more powerful than I remembered, but our weeks apart gave me a measure of invulnerability, enough, at least, to make it out of her boudoir. We'd planned to get a few drinks after practice, but she wilted before the end of sitting and I wound up talking her to sleep over a barely touched bottle of Fris. I touched her hand and it was cold. She was already gone from me. The letter was only a shard.

I climbed in bed half-heartedly and opened a book, losing ground against a fantasy that pulled me to the foot of her bed. The chill air on my skin, damp, shaking with the prospect of having her before me; I could feel her strong presence through the flimsy wall as I read and reread the same paragraph into the torporous falling out of time — darkness came and took me down with her…

A man at sea, salted with the spray of estrogen and spit, circling inside an icy gale that selflessly rips him apart at the seams. Natural instinct. No blame can be given. Better to be kept out at sea mingling only with the creatures of the deep than to blow ashore like a load of dynamite.

Days mangled together; I fell — consumed. Whipping

to the queue, the morning sinking until she strode out, the evening brought down by her return, her door was slammed and locked. The rejection was total, deceiving, masking something not spoken, an anxious pulling apart that left nothing alone; a strain beyond familiarity; a stretch of silk pulled tight over the face, distorting — the gauze sunlight stained, strained.

Peaking, shuffling, preening, no desire for sustenance but to keep the strength, to keep moving. The desire of conquest, union unfulfilled. Everything rancid, the moments vague with sorrow, lost potential. The kiss. Both of us in black, looking away, drawn tighter for the lack. The layers of abuse, all of them still fresh, one supporting the other… she pretended not to care, but closed down, locked herself in her room, looked to me in anguish, anguish, frustration, repression. Her eyes!

Not speaking, we camped in our separate rooms, foraged for food in the shared kitchen when hunger drove us out. Passing her in the hall a soft aquiescence. Sad music and incense wafted under her door, with the smell of her mixed in.

Hours, days… no sign of weakening; compromise an incremental movement in the pitch black. To approach her would allow another thrust of the knife. Unwilling to give comfort, instead wanting more — more damage, more

drama. Hot to the cold, hellish core. A sleepless night; in-between the cracks a sputtering ray, flames. I paced the streets constantly. Fiercely trained to rip and slash through the mental swamp, I began laughing hoarsely.

Dreams — the love and comfort and security, the warm bed at the end of the day, the fragrant witch musk on my clothes — every thread consumed in a fiery collapse; an empty pit of longing, the emptiness rampant.

The unappeased heroine, her spandex leopard skin untouched, her bed cold; beneath her window a thousand cigarettes, the stars gleaming in a far away dream — solitude. The crime of it! She turned me out… nothing more to devour.

"I want someone I can be proud of."

The shock settled into my bones, hysteria slowly filtered out. Persecuted for five long months, finally she burned the swaying bridge between us and raised her filthy wings to the updraft, and fell to the ground.

SEASON THREE

THE FALL

ALL THE THINGS THAT CAUSE ONE CONCERN
ABOUT THE INSTITUTION
ARE BUT A NATURAL OUTGROWTH OF
THE LOVE FOR A SAINT
TO BECOME A SAINT IN YOUR OWN REGARD
REQUIRES A BREAK FROM IT
THERE ARE NO EASY ANSWERS
THOUGH YOU MAY HAVE A THOUSAND RETREATS TO YOUR CREDIT
IT DOESN'T TRANSLATE TO ANYTHING TANGIBLE
YOU MAY FIND THAT ALL OF YOUR GOOD YEARS
ARE SWALLOWED IN THE PURSUIT OF DHARMA
WITH NOTHING TO SHOW FOR IT
THOUGH IT MAY SEEM A COLOSSAL WASTE
IT'S ONLY ANOTHER MEANINGLESS DEMARCATION
IF YOU SURVIVE THE FALL
WITH ALL OF YOUR FACILITIES INTACT
IT'S THE BEST POSSIBLE OUTCOME
FOR YOUR INNER LIFE HAS BEEN FIRMLY ESTABLISHED
AND IN A VERY REAL SENSE
THE PRACTICE HAS JUST BEGUN
THOUGH THERE ARE NO PAPERS TO PROVE YOUR YEARS OF STUDY
NO DIPLOMA OR POSITION
OR EVEN A MEANS TO SURVIVE IN THE WORLD
YOU'VE DONE THE WORK
THAT'S REQUIRED TO LIVE FREELY
AND WHAT'S A BIT OF SADNESS TO ONE ON THE PATH
BUT A THING TO DEVOUR?

fifteen. **THE OPEN FIELD**

At the Zen center things stirred under the surface, unknown to me. One of the directors started a campaign to oust nearly everyone. I'd seen it before. Those that become established drive out those that don't fit the mold. Instead of approaching the sangha as a great resource, it's king of the hill, and organized religion is a tough game.

I was holding some cash in a drawer in my room for the groceries. I'd take a five out now and then, but always put it back. I told the head monk about it — to keep things on the level. Neither of us had any money, so it was necessary if we were to survive. The same rules applied to a junkie who'd moved in, who would sneak into my room and steal the grocery money to buy heroin. I didn't figure this out until years later. The director accused me of stealing

from the temple. I thought it was about the five dollars, so it got away from me. She demanded that I be thrown out, for this and other atrocities of similar fabrication. As the push to the street began to mount, a strange thing happened. As I stood in the garden one afternoon a car pulled in slowly, stopping inches from me. The passenger door swung open, revealing a beautiful Korean woman in a black dress who motioned to me.

"Get in."

This is where the story gets complicated. The woman, Kye Soen, was my liberator, as you will see, but it's not what you think. I stayed with her briefly, but she was on a different path, one of PHD's, BMW's, and designer furniture. What she required from a man was a pile of money and a storehouse of compliments. Ah well... the light played on the sidewalk the way it always had, but there was a long period of digesting all that had occurred and reorienting myself to the world. Full of exaltation and a new creative fire, it was marvelous to let it come alive like a new voice, a new soul. All of the dark parts found their beauty through this new channel, and so were grasped, taken in, poured over, delighted in. Whatever can be said for structure, discipline, long study — the same for finding the resonance, the pattern of things, the flow of nature beyond reach of the institution. One builds on the

other, until the mind becomes spontaneously aware. Having said this, it was a very dark time.

The links of the chain, so clearly set, so dull… the end of the witch affair left me doubly free: free of an agonizing ordeal, a bloody knot of an aborted birth that couldn't struggle out of its own placenta; free of the robes that contained our struggle, that made everything I strove for impossible. Since I was forced to adapt externally, it created a sort of funnel. The fire of practice began to work its way through to life on the surface.

From the Zen center to the streets of LA — a tingling, warm feeling and the sharp taste of metal and blood. Dark, lethal, ready to stand against the tide of obligations I had coming to me, I found work as a carpenter for a temp agency. It was day to day, but sometimes a job would last a week or more. Down in a dark basement someone handed me a wire brush and pointed to a low pit.

"That's your job."

He smiled, pleased he'd found someone to crawl down in the filthy hole. It was off his hands. I couldn't see what it was until I ambled over to it. Deep inside the narrow shaft I found a snarl of rebar with cement splattered through it. I worked the iron clean. The air thick with form oil, my lungs filled with the foul air. Worn to a ridiculous state, I teetered between menacing dark moods and a mind

devoid of feeling. My mind festered; a thousand curses under the breath. I pressed on to the nose-bleed end of the day — the stray dog desolation, the driving, mewling lack; the soaring moments over the briars and overgrown fields, turning in circles in the tall weeds, sinking, peering through tiny gnats and dust motes…

Before I climbed out of the hole I discovered my father had stocks hidden away. It made my sacrifice pointless, a ridiculous waste! I couldn't fight my way back into the monastery; a man once freed is more or less gone. I returned to Louisiana to watch over him through the last weeks of his life. Deathly pale, covered in a cold sweat, he clung to the sheets like he was sailing into a tempest.

"I-can't-do-this-anymore..."

He held to whatever scrap of life left him until he was hardly human. I was of no use. I couldn't relieve his fears of annihilation — it was for him alone. The usual course unravels here. What use the things of this world? The problem of our mortality is nearly always put off until the end. Rather than apprehending life at its source, we're encouraged to fill the void with distractions. Along the trail of life few manage to get to the bottom of it, yet the question of our existence is arguably the most important we face. Fortunately for him, the struggle was soon over.

I landed a job as lead carpenter of a martini bar in the

Wilshire district. Coming from nowhere, I had to work like a madman. As I struggled to plow through the thousand responsibilities I got a letter from Rhoda. Since I'd returned the monk's robes, I was given the rank of "senior dharma teacher" and expected to pay dues to the school. I wrote her a brief note explaining my difficulties, asking, "Why, after all I've gone through, do you only contact me to ask for money?" She wrote a very short reply.

"I rest your robes."

After all my years with the school, I was thrown out over a few dollars!

"Would you like me, I said, without for a single moment thinking of Heraclites, to get down in the gutter?"

Samuel Beckett (1906-1989)

The work lapped at me like an unrelenting sea. If I'd fallen I would've remained down, so I became industrious. Dominik flew in, attracted to the heat. He appeared from time to time, to rearrange things, to open a door or close it, or set me on a different track. A saint in the guise of a demolition expert, his name a great sound like a German choir, his thoughts burst free of his small form with such force that the world would pause — always eloquent, profound, on the side of the individual.

He moved imperceptibly at first, talking to several people in the background before introducing me to Steve, a soft white devil in a nice suit. As soon as I shook Steve's hand, Dominik beat it. Steve was one of the investors, his house only a few blocks from the ocean, far from the grid's horizon of asphalt and heat haze. I started staying over when the long commute proved too difficult. Days were aflame in the gentle Mediterranean atmosphere: the smell of salt in the air, the constant surge of the tide. The colors were reduced to a single tone, all figures blending in the background, the surfaces tarnished, urban, spoiled: a swarm of joggers, bicyclists, skaters, junkies, one-eyed dogs, Siberian toe-jammers, midgets and strange men with long abdomens, East Europeans with hairy backs, and a great deal of incredibly fit young women in tiny swimsuits. The Strand — strange and wonderful end of the world.

The children played out in the open, I heard their laughter nearly every day mixed with the voices of surfers, skaters, cyclists — their fantasies superimposed on life, coloring it, concealing it. Young adults, delicate and lean, slid past with bored expressions, talked loudly through a drug haze, circled like bats, all with the same blurred features; I couldn't count how many. There were noises all around, a lot of people sitting at glass tables; the light reflecting

off the surfaces, glinting like the scales of a mackerel. You could smash it between your fingers, so poorly made. You could hear the women scuffling, the sound of their shoes scraping down the hollow streets, a gritty sound. They talked, endless chatter to fill the blank spaces. The men moved noiselessly, the soles of their shoes made to be sneaky, apart from the cowboy boot or dress shoe, and there were no cowboys.

I floated for awhile trying to write, develop short films, small editing jobs. I wasn't making any money, but with Steve I never went hungry. I suffered reams of rejection letters, bad teeth, traffic violations I couldn't pay, hardly a set of clothes to wear. I couldn't escape my poverty. Fortunately, Steve was afraid of shadows or whatever schizophrenic delusion — a change in the weather. He spoke my name loudly when entering an unsure place, such as the living room. As I observed him over time, his condition worsened. Though nothing touched him, the air was nearly always tinged with worry and despair, as he was never pushed to the point of sucking it up. I grew to loathe the protective bubble his wealth provided. Unfortunately, life being so short and humans being such fallible creatures, things just turned out bad for him.

The streets outside were lined with run-down buildings, cheap condos and apartments — the worst of our mod-

ern design. None more than three stories tall, they rose in miles of stucco as dreary as a drawn out city of Hades: a dim horizon of crowded streets; rows and rows of buildings stacked to the end of land. The stink, the noise! No break in the asphalt other than a tiny patch of grass, every bush, flower, tree a hybrid, all of it factory made; the same banal colors. Nothing pleasing to the eye, no breach of order save the rare abandoned lot, these quickly filled with trash and homeless waste; where was the overgrown field, the deep forest not cut through with trails, somewhere still wild, managed by the sun and wind alone?

> *"…when I noticed in a ditch, in full bloom, a beautiful thistle plant of the crimson variety... I climbed down into the ditch, and after driving away a velvety bumble-bee that had penetrated deep into one of the flowers and had there fallen sweetly asleep, I set to work to pluck the flower."*
>
> *Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910)*

The nightclub in Wilshire developed a good head of steam. It pulled all of us into a raging fury. We lived like rock stars: limos with piles of club kids crawling all over, free drinks, VIP tables, endless nights from one club to the next, long lines everywhere as more and more struggled to be part of it. I spent a great deal of time in the limo, watching the crowds outside. It was all I wanted, really,

that perspective.

At the height of it, when the money flowed, trickled down even to me, and Steve's circle of friends were all familiar and friendly as pirates, I followed them to a small lake in the desert. One of the couples had a new boat, a powerful sport craft designed for wakeboarding. I filmed them most of the day as they took turns vaulting over the waves. It was all new to me, not something I'd choose to waste time with, but what do I know? They began prodding me.

"Why don't you give it a try?"

I refused, but they all chimed in and before long I was yanked underwater by the monstrous engine, my left knee twisted out of its joint.

I stayed pinned to the couch for weeks. The swelling remained. I pulled myself down the stairs, to a clinic for X-rays and an MRI, which showed three of the four ligaments that held my knee together were ruined. Surgery would take a year or more of waiting in lines, day-long lines full of Mexican immigrants and poor blacks from LA's East Side, and weeks between appointments. How does anyone survive it? It can only become more difficult for everyone. As more and more humans are added, isn't each life diminished?

I became possessed, nearly insane with getting the work

out. Things fell into place like an assembly line. The delays gave more brooding time. A phone call put me off the trail, and on to something else. A great amount of new material came from random occurrences and the rhythm that was established. Since I had no formula or set way of developing material, it came through every door.

THE THING COURSING INSIDE ME
WAS THE LONG STRUGGLE TO BECOME A WRITER
KOREAN ZEN DOESN'T FOSTER ARTISTIC EXPRESSION
HERE AGAIN THERE WAS A CONFLICT WITH THE DOGMA
THAT HAD TO BE WORKED THROUGH
IF I WERE TO MAKE SOMETHING OUT OF MY EXPERIENCES
TO BRING THE WISDOM OF THE DHARMA THROUGH TO THE SURFACE
IT WOULD HAVE TO CONFORM
TO THE TOOLS AVAILABLE TO ME
IT WAS A TRYING TIME OF THRESHING OUT A NEW IDENTITY
A LIVELIHOOD THAT WOULD INCORPORATE ALL THE DIVERSE ELEMENTS
I WORKED ON THE MATERIAL AT EVERY OPPORTUNITY
GAVE IT ALL OF MY BEST MOMENTS
THE ACT OF WRITING
WAS A DIRECT PIPELINE TO THE DEEP SUBSTANCE
THERE WAS NO CHOICE, NO OTHER WAY TO EXPRESS
THE EXTRAORDINARY THINGS I'D UNCOVERED
EVENTUALLY, WHEN THE TWO ASPECTS
THE FORMAL AND INFORMAL
BEGAN TO MESH, THERE WAS NO MORE CONCERN FOR EITHER
BEING OUTSIDE THE INSTITUTION CERTAINLY HELPED THE PROCESS
IT FORCED ME TO ADAPT ON MY OWN TERMS
WHICH FOR A TIME DEMANDED THAT I STOP THINKING OF ZEN ENTIRELY
I WAS CONSUMED WITH THE WORK TO THE POINT
THAT I CEASED TO THINK OF ANYTHING ELSE
IT WAS THE FEVER THAT BROUGHT ME TO MY FORTIETH YEAR
THE YEARS OF TRAINING
FLOWERED IN THE NEW ENVIRONMENT
AN EFFICIENT MECHANISM FOR SOUNDING THE DEPTHS
WHEN MY BODY GREW SLUGGISH I'D LIMP DOWN THE OLD TRAIN TRACKS
WITH MY LEG IN A BRACE, OR TAKE THE SUBWAY DOWNTOWN
TO ESCAPE, TO WRITE

sixteen. **DOWNTOWN**

To stay adrift, not concerned with land or sea, or being underground; not caring about moving from place to place. Things went by the window like a halothane dream. The train rose above the horizon. No more dismal walls covered with graffiti, the only modern art that resonates with me, we edged by rows of RV's in the dirt below and a field of LA's long, flat roofs with people standing in the parking lots. The sun roasted me alive in the thing of metal and sorrow and grime. On to the freeway, the tracks wedged between lanes like an afterthought. Oppressive, loud, the stop bristled with the noise of hurtling traffic like a hornet's nest.

Inside the car, fragments of a thousand stories, thoughts alive and submerged — the voices drowned each other out; a filter of human noise. It always gives me a sense of

ease and contentment: the crush of humanity, the constant press of the crowd. There's something about careening through underground tunnels in a cabin full of bad air — the strange hysteria, endless fights, loud guys selling candy, vagrants, derelicts, stowaways, and young girls talking over the seats.

The tunnel flashed blue fluorescent over the young women near the door. Impossible to be young and not beautiful. The flickering light revealed an older Asian couple. I watched the woman shuffle behind her husband, resigned to her role, crushed by the twisted circumstances that had brought them there. I could sense their hard times as if it were a scene in a movie; the troubling lack of the final note.

A pregnant woman shuffled in carrying a baby in a basket. The world is filled to the brim and still the madness to procreate. Was there something about her that the world needed more of? But nature surges forward ceaselessly, there's no end to the flow of it. Our long fight to dominate the earth has led to a resounding victory. How many animals have gone extinct in front of us? Now it seems only the domesticated ones will survive, and their cousins the garbage eaters. The forests are now trampled. It's hard to get a good, strong dose of the wild. There's so much to be gleaned from an overgrown field of weeds, a quiet hour

in a deep forest, so much that can't be conveyed otherwise — *the movement of the crow from one field to the next*.

The train lurched at every stop like a watermelon truck with a full load — good for the digestion. Eight blocks to downtown and the wheels froze in place. My pregnant friend, now with a young male pierced in her talons, screeched into her cell phone.

"Of course you don't care, you're just hanging out with your friends! You're so ungrateful! Why do you spend so much time with them?"

No logic there. She cut off after a long pause, tired of listening to the dial tone. I looked at her face, curious. The frontal lobes had expanded twice the normal size, her eyes swollen under a Cro-Magnon brow. Did she notice me? No… I'd glanced away fast enough. You can look at any man or beast for half a second, even a postpartum woman, as long as it doesn't show on the face.

The train stalled so long that everyone began leaving. I grabbed my satchel and got in line behind a wall of cement and a chain-link fence. The outbound train had plowed through a car, killing the occupants, but our train was spared. Our cagey mood evaporated on the sunny street as we fanned out around the crumpled car. A thousand souls, the smell of sulphur and ozone, the group surging, someone shouting over us, to not be drowned in the sheer

numbers; a primitive leaning not fully felt out to the end, for it's usually a delight that the individual is made quiet.

The long walk with the bad knee had me leaning against walls, clinging to lampposts. I pulled out a scrap of paper and wrote down a long stream of words, reckless, boiling over with things coming out of me faster than I could take them down. Like the feeling in a room after someone dies, the crackling violence of a house burning, of everything lost. I was stricken, lost in it. I gave it free reign. After all, what was there to defend?

Nothing is benign in this mad life of transformation to transformation. No single thing exists that didn't claw its way out of the depths. Every word was wrung out through ceaseless pacing. Through my own suffering I gave rise to it, so if anything I wanted to suffer more, to add more fuel, more velocity, ferocity; to burn on the spot, as if my existence were a thing to be squeezed and sucked dry. The work was solar, the heat and all things radiating from it. At best I was consumed in a sort of fusion, where time and space had no meaning, matter and energy were transformed; *I* was transformed in the blaze, and lost to it — a conflagration of the soul.

I passed the corporate branding, eyes staring out of every crevice, they stared without blinking. Some sang quietly to themselves; a city of ants carrying things over their

heads, following each other in small groups. I was entranced by the pattern, the way things crested and broke apart, the random silences together with some dynamic power emanating from every corner, every hole. In the crowd all is melted in the heat of union, all signals mixed; a whirling energy that almost becomes something of its own: the hive mind. Not yet, but soon we will move toward this. Already it informs us, drives us like a light in the forest. The work of Zen is to inculcate this awareness — a mind open to all things, all points of view. Though how we will live in the future is impossible to delineate, some sort of mind to mind connection, like cloud computing, is unavoidable.

Kardashev, and after him Michio Kaku, both physicists, defined three levels of civilization. With ours not yet free of fossil fuels, we haven't reached level one. A level two civilization would be capable of harnessing the sun, three the entire galaxy. Their colleagues extend it further, to the point that we could escape a dying universe through a hole in space, or create a new universe entirely; the eternal cycle.

The singularity event, the birth of the cosmos, could it be the work of an advanced civilization before us? This could explain the dark matter the makes up a large part of the universe: old particles that have lost their fire from

universes unknown, as even the atom has a lifespan.

For now we must deal with the individual, and every one with their own requirements. I followed a knot of them into the train station. Hardly room to stand two abreast, the line folded back and there was some confusion about where we should go; a thousand different stories racing like mad across their faces. It was something like silence. The door opened and closed as shadows moved across the glass, the room packed full, everyone waiting, nodding off, buffeted into place like spores, growing mycelium under the street.

> *"...for like flash-fire the sense of contact, of being not a separate entity but a fused line-unit, will carry my selfhood out to the sides of the waitline and crackling along it forward and backward until my perception of myself is wholly lost..."*
>
> *John Hersey (1914-1993)*

If it were up to me there would be more — more old people weighted down with complicated thoughts and obvious terror; more Latino women with their powerful arms; more nubians standing with reckless authority, focused keenly on their own; more tiny Asians with their perfect outfits like tourniquets; more hop-heads with eyes on something far away and sad; more big, pale, soft people who moved quietly, pulled apart by the forces at work;

more beautiful women in delicate clothes, always looking as if something bad were going to happen. Could it be a secret wish? If they were more practical they would trade the flimsy blouse for some type of kevlar, don't you think? I'd like to see them armed as well, with pistols. I'd rest easier with their wild, furtive eyes always on the lookout.

Unfortunately, with all the people there was a shortage of chairs. I paced beside the tracks. I waited at a subway stop after, struggling to erase what had occurred. It wasn't anything that needed to be shut out, but somehow oppressive — too much stimulus, too many suffering people. There was a moment where it crested, all foam and blood and the thing boiling out of the tunnel in a blast of stale air, everyone on their feet. Finally, I inched my way out of the city.

The train had a broken air-conditioner and an alarm that went off every few minutes, with nearly every seat taken. The next screaming black tunnel let out to a sunny street circled by helicopters. We sat dead on the tracks in a subtropic sweatbath. When the train finally started up again there was a warning that it was now an express and would make only a few stops more. We careened back above the streets, closer to the sun, in what appeared to be a burst of cosmic rays. The express stopped dead a few more times, to set the oven, and the crowd broke out into peals of laughter.

I can't explain it, but we ended in good spirits. Finally the train crawled into Rosa Parks and went dead — no great loss. By a broad and pointless stroke of luck it was my stop. I switched trains and the miles again were lost to repetition and boredom, trees going by LA's towering causeways of concrete, one of the few features that could be discerned.

UNTIL THE WORK IS FINISHED, AND LIFE ITSELF
THERE IS THE ETERNAL NEED FOR SUSTENANCE
HOW MANY SPEND THEIR ENTIRE LIVES
STRUGGLING TO FIND THE RIGHT PARTNER?
IF THERE'S ANOTHER CHOICE, FOR THE DIVINE ASPECT
THEN WE MUST AVOID THE SAME TENDENCY
THERE CAN BE NO SEEKING FOR ANYTHING
"TO MEET HIM WITHOUT RECOGNIZING HIM
TO SPEAK WITH HIM WITHOUT KNOWING HIS NAME."
RINZAI (?-866)
IF YOU'VE COME THIS FAR, THE ONLY WAY FORWARD
IS COMPLETE IMMERSION
THEN, AS THE MASTERS SAY, EVEN IF THE WHOLE UNIVERSE WERE DESTROYED
IT WOULDN'T CHANGE A SINGLE THING
IT MAY SOUND EXTRAORDINARY, BUT IT'S WHERE WE'RE HEADED
A RELATIONSHIP SUCH AS THIS ISN'T OUTSIDE YOUR GRASP
BUT IT IS SOMETHING UNUSUAL
FOR WHERE WE ARE AS A SOCIETY
WITH NO MEANS TO SUPPORT MYSELF
IT HAD TO SOMEHOW BRANCH FROM THE DISCIPLINED ENVIRONMENT
AS I GREW INTO MY ROLE AS A STARVING ARTIST
I FOUND A WAY TO SURVIVE
WITH PART-TIME WORK AND A BENEFACTOR
EVERYTHING THAT UNFOLDED
WHILE IT COULD NOT BE MAPPED OUT BEFORE
MADE PERFECT SENSE, AS IF DRAWN BY A DIVINE HAND
THE STRUGGLE AGAINST THE ELEMENTS
WHEN DIRECTED FROM A STRONG PRACTICE MIND
CREATES A BEAUTIFUL, ENIGMATIC DESIGN
THAT COULD ALMOST BE CALLED INTELLIGENT
THAT EVERY MOVE IS TOWARD A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING
IS THE IMPRINT OF THE DIVINE

seventeen. **THE PRESS FORWARD**

The days rolled in like a thunderhead, as dark and restless. The light fell the same whether I was there or not, held long enough for a few observations, hardly enough time to observe the span of things.

"Why do you keep it so dark in here?"

"It gets dark on its own..."

I could just make out her long, thin silhouette, bent in that peculiar Korean way as she gathered her things. Kye Soen was more than a friend. There was something about her, whatever it was that captured me all those years before: her striking face, her sensitivity. We fell to the ground from the forces at work, fused together. Little was left unchanged in us; at times it seemed we were the same. The peculiar human struggle to combine DNA; we were powerless against it, and because of our differences a new upheaval every day. There was some doubt in her

that I didn't understand what she was getting at, though it was never beyond my grasp. Since I didn't go to college, things had to be explained to me in great detail, the same mindset that condemns those that don't belong to the church. Though there was no problem intellectually, we might as well be from opposite ends of the universe. Whatever the subject she'd lose her place and start again, the same dismal sentences often repeated word for word.

It was a final tempering after a long process in the furnace. The hotter the better! To the end of endurance! When the crackling blaze finally abated, the female had been removed from the level of sustenance and placed far down the list of beautiful things that should be admired from a distance, behind badgers and bear cubs. Thus the last great impediment to the path, and the greatest attachment that concerned me, was gone.

She drove off, finally. I went out to the courtyard to clear my head. It was late, but I was just building a head of steam. I did odd jobs to survive, trading the progress of the material for a life nearly swallowed in labor; a great deal of lessons piled end to end: the long ascent through the teachings I was made to absorb, the thrashing of the limbs, the watching over a similar process in a thousand others.

As I stood near the fountain a few women bustled in. I

knew the blonde from somewhere, one of the usual places. She'd flown in from Michigan, caught in the currents, a sparkling fun personality with that great heartland sensibility, on fire in the new LA playground, lit from underneath with the same old longing.

The work — to forge and trammel out the damned treasure, like alchemy, requires the heavens to move. A dangerous operation demanding all the facilities and a large amount of ground for pacing. I swore as she lunged down the steps, the two others clinging to her like intimates. They all wore costumes: Marilyn Monroe, Charlie Chaplin, and a candy striper. Marilyn was the one I knew.

"Hey Henry… watcha' doin?"

I could tell they were going to camp out on me. Women must be tended like a campfire, and nothing can be done about it. It struck me that I was to remain engaged or they would feel put off, but I had no need of their company — something they couldn't fathom. The whole thing was a lie. They acted in service of a loneliness that begged to be filled. The real need, the real topic of conversation, wasn't what I was doing, but some lack that remained unsounded in them. Knowing this, and the futility of playing it through, I sat down.

"No! …don't sit down…"

"Girls, it's three in the morning."

Kye Soen wanted to live inside me, Marilyn to be entertained for an hour. Their need came from the same place — isn't love at the core of everything? But a primitive love that doesn't consider the needs of others, a juvenile mind that latches on to things to appease itself? It's a misunderstanding that there's some lack. Life is everywhere. To become awake to the flow of it is more than enough.

"Night is longing, longing, longing, beyond all endurance."
Henry Miller (1891-1980)

The end of night is not longing, but a demand. Kye Soen, nearly diabolical with her intrusions, kept the pressure on until I was reduced to a simpler beast. I was bludgeoned by her "caring" for me, which, when taken down to its core, was a basic lack she was attempting to fill through me, unwarranted, unneeded. The plain fact couldn't be conveyed. It was frightening to her, at the same time boring, and far more compelling the distraction.

The individual nearly always uses the partner as a totem — to drive their own demons out. Since they're going against nature, attempting to be made whole externally, chaos enters the equation. Kye Soen was upset with me, not because of my feelings or needs, but that her own desire to fill the void was denied.

Instead of coming to terms with existence, or developing a meaningful, compassionate love, the important thing was my relationship to her — the same line of thought that gave birth to the Da Vinci Code and a thousand other dramatizations, that one can't make the leap beyond relationship. If you follow that line of reasoning, you could say the giants of history: Buddha, Jesus, Rumi, Milarepa — should've settled down and taken a wife. Not to say there's anything wrong with raising a family, it's just that it doesn't resolve anything.

I looked at my guests in the courtyard. Apart from the sexual provocation, there was no communication, no interest in my desire, or comfort, or whatever subject matter suited me. It was all a playful banter, a thinly-veiled probing to feel out the stranger with a swift cock in the garden and the thousand decencies, the thousand entanglements after.

The creative urge of the female is often stifled, the child replaced by the partner, friend, pet, potted plant… the transfer of this enormous creative power to an object already formed is a seedbed of discontent, as things don't need to be re-created. The female is nearly oppressive with her instinct to make a nest, to enclose everything in her arms, to attract a mate and with it practically the attention of every male. The reproductive drive itself is noble,

certainly, but if the sole occupation is to attract a mate, then humanity is reduced.

The individual is often unsatisfied with a partner's behavior, and as a result knows no harmony. Yet the individual's point of view is difficult to define, as it often follows the course of things. The corporate trends and fashion are designed to prey on this — a questionable foundation that must be taken into account when wading through their demands. The real need is for something else, something not yet recognized in them.

To establish some distance is impossible, as it puts them on the defensive. Why would anyone want to struggle out of the honey pot? There must be something wrong. But to live for another is ultimately vexed. Is anyone saying this? It can't be maintained anymore than a dream, and doesn't get down to the root. I realize that to maintain order there must be some illusion held aloft, but underneath this a hard-won detachment, only possible after a long trail of prank by prank, until the movement and noise is like the chattering of birds. To have any facility with a partner's ceaseless prying into things is beyond the scope of this book, for this type of monstrous ability requires the annihilation of the soul.

Outside the sacrament of relationship, which I refuse to discuss further due to my dim understanding and poor

facility, one needs to be validated. To be acknowledged is so crucial that the conquest alone is often the sole pursuit. The need is hot and quick, and soon resolved. Then what?

> *"There are only a very few really permissible things: like the sea, for example."*
>
> *Yukio Mishima (1925-1970)*

Today's mindset isn't appeased in the normal course of things, it requires an augmentation of the environment. To perceive the source from underneath the turmoil is nearly impossible, yet it's the only way our longing can be resolved. A paradigm shift is necessary, away from the manipulation of things — to allow things to shake down to a natural sort of resolution; the cultivation of a universal, primal wisdom: the birth of the saint.

THE ANCIENTS SAY THAT KARMA IS LIKE A VAST MOUNTAIN
NO MATTER HOW FAR YOU'VE GONE
THE SAME ELEMENTS APPEAR AGAIN
THE SAME TROUBLE
IT'S VERY UNUSUAL TO PASS THROUGH ANYTHING COMPLETELY
BUT THAT'S WHAT WE'RE TO DO
THERE'S AN ETERNAL ASPECT TO IT
THAT WHAT YOU ARE CANNOT BE DEFINED
NEITHER THE MOVEMENT FORWARD
I FIND IT USEFUL TO WELCOME THE DARK MOMENTS
UNTIL THE TIDE FINALLY RECEDES
THERE WILL BE A LOT OF THINGS PAINTED BLACK BEFORE THEN!
HAVING GONE THROUGH THIS "DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL"
I CAN SEE NOW THAT IT WAS VERY DIFFICULT
BUT IN THE STREAM IT WAS ALWAYS ALRIGHT
THE BODY KNOWS WHAT IT'S DOING
IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE CONSTANTLY MONITORED
THE SAME FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH
EVEN IN THE LOWEST MOMENTS THERE IS FORWARD MOVEMENT
THOUGH THE WEIGHT OF YOUR KARMA MAY OBSCURE THIS
YOUR PERSONA ISN'T MADE OF MEMORIES
OR WHATEVER IMAGES YOU HOLD OF YOURSELF
BUT HOW YOU MOVE AGAINST THE CURRENT
IT MAY BE A SURPRISE HOW YOU SEE YOURSELF
AFTER A LONG RETREAT
WHERE DID THE OLD IMAGE GO?
WAS IT ALWAYS AN ILLUSION?
EVEN FARTHER AWAY ARE THE IMAGES IMPOSED ON YOU BY OTHERS
IF YOU ARE TO LET THE TRUE FORM EMERGE
YOU CAN SEE THESE MUST ALSO BE DISREGARDED
IT'S NO DIFFERENT THAN THE ACT OF MEDITATION
ALL OF IT IS TAKEN IN AND LEFT TO GO ITS OWN WAY

eighteen. **DEAD SEASON**

The days were long waiting for surgery. I was forced to move in with Kye Soen, everything etched away in an acid bath of ethyl and chromium dioxide. My bones phosphor white, my nails reduced to glue, I was brought too often to the sickly sweet end of the day. Nothing! There was no way to extricate myself without living on the street. She rose up through the bile and excrement and latched on like a tapeworm, everything spoiled by her pointless dramas; an endless parade. My ears burned through. There was no more listening, nothing I could do but handle the flow of anger in and out, like a check dam. The same as the darkness of Vashon, since I had no means to avoid either, I let them rule me.

No matter what happened, she returned to her grim work, as if no hair was missing, no blood lost. Part sala-

mander, the diabolical part, something of me died with her, but that can't be helped.

All the things I couldn't get at through formal practice: the way I liked to do things — gone — to retreat into silence — gone — to retreat into work — gone — to long for the company of another — gone. As much as I was tortured by her, I was dethroned, everything stripped from me. My leg shriveled to half its size. I was nearly resolved to being a cripple when the hospital finally called. Damned mortality! The *conclusion* nature draws, who'd as soon destroy as create, or let out a volume of stinking sulphur — the individual is of no consequence. Why make trouble here? Every word of this will disintegrate after I'm gone, of no more importance than the death of a star, or birth of a new one, and a star can't go back on its word.

The surgeons had me half-drugged on a gurney.

"Is he out?"

"Yeah… I already started him."

"How are we going to get him on the table?"

Still conscious, I flap-jacked over to the damned table and put my knee up… surprised, their voices receded. With no angels waiting, there was only the cold, smooth steel of the operating table, the beehive light dazzling and beautiful, then dark.

I wasn't afraid to go under. If I could've made a request it would've been for more gas, just to make sure. As soon as I closed my eyes there was the incessant beep of the heart monitor. In reality it had been eight hours, but it seemed as if only moments had passed. My leg was full of staples, wrapped the full length in gauze, with tubes running out to drain.

I died. Still, the work continued. The difficulties! The dealing with spectators after a good laugh, the old friends who refused to see the state I was in. How could they not know? A man underground doesn't have much to say.

"The dead are not saints."

Simone De Beauvoir (1908-1986)

It wasn't long before I realized the disconnect.

"Does this mean I'm off the treadmill?"

… nothing but static on the line.

The Patriarch had a desperate student who couldn't free himself of reoccurring attachments. Strong desire, difficult to overcome, requires a potent medicine.

"You must become a dead man. A dead man doesn't want anything."

Not wanting anything is a complex statement that can be used to disarm opponents, carve out a greater share

of the profits, cajole others, or as an excuse to lie under a shade tree and watch the clouds all day. All of life is contained in these words, but to become a dead man is a difficult thing lost to history and interpretation. If the text is taken up as the means to liberation, the thing becomes a quagmire, and no one understands the true meaning save those for whom these words are unnecessary.

Surely it's the outsiders: mystics, rebels, visionaries who carry the hopes of mankind. But there's a more basic flaw that doesn't need a champion to reveal it. If I didn't live long enough for anyone to work their theism into me, how to salvage me? For my part, if I had only moments to live, the last thing I could want would be someone talking in my ear — at most the sound of the wind, a tree, maybe a bird flying through the sky — if that's not asking too much.

It took a full year before I regained the use of my leg. I'd aged a great deal, lost tone and feeling, and was so ushered into the declining years. As soon as I could drag myself out the door I returned to Steve's. Kye Soen, more furious as time passed, was getting dangerous.

The long ordeal affected Steve and everyone around him. It gave me enough of a cushion that I was able to get a short film out and win a few awards. The book was strong enough that I found an agent, though he ditched

me after a year. Burning with the new possibilities, a crazed artist monk and Steve's ticket to fame, the phone rang.

"Henry, have you heard the news?"

"*Dominik*…what's wrong?"

"The Patriarch died last night."

I couldn't believe it. No shining successor to continue the line, no important words to me, or anyone. It was over. My last conversation with him was of returning my robes. A sacred pain, like fire-walking, or some other burning, it will always remain tied to my memories of him.

SEASON FOUR

ENLIGHTENMENT

NATURE IS PERFECTLY HAPPY FOR YOU TO REMAIN ON THE SURFACE
IT'S THE BUSINESS OF THE INDIVIDUAL TO ACCEPT THIS OR NOT
IT'S AS IF THE CONSCIOUSNESS IS DRAWN TO A MICROSCOPIC POINT
THOUGH THE IMAGES BENEATH IT CHANGE
THE VIEW REMAINS TIGHTLY FOCUSED
THE APPARATUS ISN'T MADE FOR A BROAD VIEW
ESTABLISHING A NEW RESOLVING POWER
NEARLY REQUIRES THE DISSOLVING POTENTIAL OF A BREAKDOWN
WHO WOULD READILY WALK INTO THIS?
TO ADD TO IT, THE CHANGES TO ONE'S RESOLVING POWER
ARE USUALLY INCREMENTAL
REQUIRING A THOUSAND NEW SUMMITS
A THOUSAND PLUNGES TO THE DEPTHS
"SINCE YOUR STRENGTH IS INSUFFICIENT
YOU MIGHT NOT BE ABLE TO TRANSCEND SAMSARA BY A SINGLE LEAP
BUT, AFTER FIVE OR TEN YEARS, YOU WOULD SURELY
HAVE MADE A GOOD BEGINNING
AND BE ABLE TO MAKE FURTHER PROGRESS SPONTANEOUSLY."
HUANG PO (?-849)
FOR ME THE THING DIDN'T REALLY COME ALIVE
UNTIL IT HAD TURNED DORMANT
MY ZEN IDENTITY FORGOTTEN
NO ROBES, NO STANDING, NO SPECIAL ABILITIES
THERE WAS A SHIFT IN THE FOCUS
I WAS REMOVED FROM THE STAGE
THE LENS LOST
AS I BROUGHT THINGS IN
IT WAS TO A NEW FOCAL LENGTH

nineteen. **FIRE**

For years I'd waited for a successor to set fire to a new generation. The Patriarch had retired a decade before, with no mention of who would be the one. I'd come too late to the fold, so was at the end of the line. His first students were already established as teachers when I moved to Providence. They were the ones who had direct contact with the Patriarch. My generation, the second tier, were largely in the background. A lot of them are still out there. A few became teachers. I found it unsatisfactory. I wanted the opportunity to bond with a real master, so the question of whether to remain with the school or not was more than politics, it was a matter of survival. If I were to take a number and wait in line, I would've burned out. Was I to give in so easily?

There *was* a wonderful teacher on the scene for some time, a spiritual dynamo approaching the level of the Pa-

triarch, but things as they are, while the two traveled the world on a marathon teaching tour he died of a heart attack. Afterward there was some talk of a democratic system, where the head would be elected by the board and hold office for a predetermined period, but after the Patriarch was gone there was no more of this.

With no great sage to light the halls there was a surge among the older students who'd had actual contact with an enlightened master. Still, I remained outside the school. What use were the robes to me? The path flowered in me — I felt it working before me at every step. There was no lack, no need to hold or release any of it, but I wouldn't have this conviction if I wasn't living in the seat of indulgence.

All of the turmoil drew Dominik out of the monastery circuit. He was quiet the way he moved in my new environment, his hand to my throat, the burnt ends of his fingers rough on my skin. He lifted me up, a forgotten slag, and put me back into the furnace.

"…and into this bizarrerie, as into all others, I quietly fell."
Edgar Allen Poe (1809-1849)

All the people around me fastened to him. His poetic, unforgettable voice draws one like a warm campfire in

the wilderness. The great liberator, archetype of the rebel in its highest form, few who listened to his observations were not taken in.

“There was a fire. I’m sure you’ve heard about it.”

“No, I don’t get news over here.”

“The desert temple caught fire.”

“It’s gone?”

“The workshop, the new solar panels, millions in tools and supplies, all of my things… a lot of trees were lost, but the other buildings were saved.”

“What about the Abbot?”

“He’s still there, but gone soon… a Korean monk’s taking over.”

“What will happen to the temple?”

“That’s a good question…”

The fire, though devastating, supplied us with a fully functional monastery primed for its first kyolche. The tragedy and new beginning, the fire and the conversion captured me: the hidden meaning, the many implications; the clean line nature cleaves through chaos, the balance struck anew in dazzling patterns; the marvelous machine!

After Kye Soen and the long battle to walk again, all my youthful passions were damped down; the internal dialogue squelched. I had no more feeling for the outside world, only to deepen the practice. I’d finally made a clean

break of it. Did it take so long, nearly 20 years, for practice to mature? Longer! I had the short path of calamity: the depth of the canker and its ferocity — to the amount, the degree.

Dominik was boiling mad from the complicated network of plumbing that had to be salvaged. His hands were torn and bandaged, his clothes ruined. The dark circles under his eyes made one look away. Why did he work so hard? Was he the only one in the world who could set up a furnace?

He had a heated discussion with the Abbot. I was too far away to hear the details, but a loud outburst and him in the distance, his monk's bag over his shoulder, his straw hat riding high. He ducked into the back of a black sedan, and was gone.

The wind through the canyon a near constant moaning; the sky caught fire as the sun cleared the ridge. Against a racing overcast with dark veins sliding over a fat raven was held in place, pointing the way out like a weathervane, the way he'd gone.

"…to one in sympathy with nature each season, in its turn, seems the loveliest."

Mark Twain (1835-1910)

The desert reveals the bare end of things. With my long absence from the school, it was if I were starting over from the beginning. I fell into a natural rhythm completely my own. If a thought welled up I'd take it or not, depending on the urgency. Sometimes I'd remain glued to the floor, but it required a great amount of slash and burn. If something was pressing I'd look into it. I kept a notebook. I wrote things down on the breaks. I went for walks and wrote more. I spent time in the wilderness: the ravens and eagles circling, the wild sage and juniper, the sunlight and starry nights, the feel of the ground. My mind quickly found its ease, overwhelmed me with its clarity and strength. My body began to tremble with rapture, as in the beginning.

A month passed before I began to notice something peculiar. The floor came through in the same implacable way, but all the fleshy things that glint like minnows in a pond quieted of their own — in the presence of something new.

A Western Zen Master remarked, "If you do strong practice, you'll experience universal energy."

"What's it like?"

"I don't like to talk about it. It may impede your practice."

"Please, you must tell me!"

Reluctantly he continued, "It's like this…"

He shook visibly, rattled his arms and legs like a Pentecostal. "…a pulsing, kinetic energy continually moving back and forth, like ocean waves."

Everything in nature is animated by this, of course my practice began to manifest it. For the landscape of consciousness to be laid bare, a certain ease is required, but along with it an applied effort — to hold this tension and release, hold and release. I lunged into practice as before, but relaxed, collected myself, and plunged in again with great intensity. I did this continuously until I had no need of the technique — not long. In this way I could easily sit through a number of rounds without tiring, or drifting off. Sitting was strong and clear all the way through. It opened a great channel into the deep substance.

In this shedding of skin a new man is revealed, and a new kind of sorrow. There was no problem anywhere and then everything was a problem. At times even the feet of the Lord seemed painful to endure. Why this eternal sadness? I had no comforting thought to take it away. At times I begged for some trifle to ease the constant gnawing, hardly appeased — and then it was gone, by itself. Always this way.

What I've been able to discern on the surface — the mirage of thought and emotion, of consciousness, though

very compelling; shiny like quicksilver, the way that it shimmers, with drifts, eddies and tides, and the pull of a deeper current; the complete lack at the core — mind as it expands and contracts, you can encourage it, direct it somewhat, but why bother? Nature has no quandary with a thought, or no thought. To allow the mind to come to its natural end — to allow it! Again and again and again and trembling and trembling and trembling…

Toward the end I was so deeply shaken by the enormity of it that I couldn't see — forget the floor, now a glowing, luminous mass. The feeling of euphoria was so overpowering that I wearied of it. Like a microcosm of life, I'd gain a new vantage point, and rest there for a moment, days only, and another ascent. From this new ground I would climb again. Such velocity! The experience was so strong that it didn't matter what more could be added. I couldn't walk afterward, my eyes fluttering madly, hardly able to see.

The days railed through me like a childhood dream, the desert night like the landscape of the soul. I walked through the chaparral aflame — if only the night would continue! The breeze, subtle quiet voice of God — a dream, so much a dream that I forgot where I was, what I was…under the full moon I walked deep into the canyon and let the desert have me.

The whirlwind of the modern miasma, fully apprehended, superseded in a single vault, only then — the ringing, crystal clear view from the summit, all things left just as they are, unvarnished. Details are meaningless, the entire mass of it as one, a solar collapse, white hot! The features melt into each other, the weight of it! Like the beat of wings the sudden flight, and distance and heaven and earth are revealed as one, the pulsing lava the firmament itself, the sacred ground.

WE'VE NOT ONLY GONE PAST THE INSTITUTION
BUT BEYOND RELATIONSHIP
HERE, FINALLY, WE ENTER THE SACRED GROUND
HERE LIFE BECOMES SOMETHING ENTIRELY DIFFERENT
FROM WHAT YEARNING SPAWNED IT
IF SO, YOU ARE NO MORE A STUDENT OF THE WAY
BUT AN ADEPT
HOW MANY TIMES WE'VE BEEN BEATEN DOWN
YET THIS IS THE MOST DIFFICULT PART
FOR THE THING MUST CATCH ALIGHT AND BURN ON ITS OWN
TO SIT A LONG RETREAT IS TO DWELL
AT THE FEET OF THE LORD
YOU ARE NO LONGER CONTROLLED
BY THE MOODS AND THOUGHTS OF OTHERS
THOUGH THEIR STORIES CAN BE EASILY READ
INSTEAD THE ABSOLUTE RADIATES CEASELESSLY
THROUGH THE VARIOUS FORMS
THE ASPECTS OF WHICH CANNOT BE NUMBERED
AND SO ATTAIN A SORT OF STASIS
IT'S AS IF YOU ARE WITNESS TO THE BIRTH OF THE COSMOS
ALL THINGS APPEARING IN THEIR PLACE IN DUE COURSE
IN A PERFECT SYMMETRY OF FORM AND ORDER
HERE THE UNSPEAKABLE MYSTERY IS LAID BARE
HERE IS THE MERGING OF MANKIND WITH THE GODHEAD
THE MEANING
THE ULTIMATE TRUTHS
IF YOU ARE NOT SHOUTING NOW AND WRECKING THE FURNITURE
THEN YOU SOON WILL BE
THERE'S NO WAY TO AVOID IT

twenty. **THE DOOR**

I returned to Korea the following winter. It was Dominik who gave me the idea.

"It's the second anniversary of the Patriarch's death. You have to go… everyone will be there."

I was nervous about showing my face again, but a layman there is lower than a dog, so there was no need for this. I arrived too late with one of Kye Soen's interruptions, an important essay I had to write for her, paying an old debt.

I stepped out of the taxi to the empty parking lot below the courtyard. A dark night, there were only a few lights on, a few old bosalnims in the main hall. Everyone, more than seventy friends from the old days, had already left for Gye Ryong San. Zosha waited instead. I got a shock

when she shoved her head through the door! She hadn't changed much. She'd settled on her haunches, but still had the look of a bulldog with that powerful lock-jaw that could take anyone down. For some reason, perhaps because I'd put up such a good fight all those years before, she was misty-eyed.

"Where've you been?"

I have to admit I loved her then. So what if she was angry? So was I. The difference was I turned it back into the work. Her voice, her strong, sad eyes, that damned sharp tongue! She didn't need my approval. Her training had continued uninterrupted while I was away. It made her unexpectedly soft, reverent. Bowing to me, she was nearly in tears with all the things she wanted to say.

"I'm sorry for what happened back then. I've changed a lot."

"I can tell."

"What happened to you?"

"A lot of trouble, but I haven't gone hungry. I've been staying in Hermosa Beach. It's like the new beatnik scene — there's a tiny thread of art culture in Los Angeles, though it's a desperate, poor scramble on the ground as you can imagine."

"Why don't you come back?"

I couldn't say I was right to leave the monastery. There

wasn't anything like a Kye Soen in her life, but she lived far beneath me, and I was nearly always broke. She had no TV, no computer of her own, no time off, no late nights with a bottle of French wine, no bookcase full of classics, or even a newspaper to glance through, no sense of the march of time, no smell of cordite, no walking around half-drunk wearing only boxers and combat boots — there was a lot missing. More importantly, the practice was made dull. I got a death chill from the corporate whitewash.

"I love the creative fire and the wilderness too much to be sweeping the halls of the institution."

"Then how will the teaching line continue?"

"The teaching? What we really need is a strong new voice with color and personality, that would appeal to the independent spirit of the West — a dialogue from outside the institution."

"You're just being antagonistic."

"OK, but your argument comes from a society that conforms to itself six thousand percent. We have to find a way that takes care of the *individual*, what the West values most highly."

She looked at me for a few moments more, but remained silent. Life in a box is life in a box: a sheltered life of regular meals, days divided by the sound of a moktak, everyone in grey robes, slippers. It wasn't easy for me. Certainly it's

difficult, but it is possible to practice while living in society. There's no easy way, as the centers are a mixed bag of holy, perfect creatures, petty tyrants, socialists, psychopaths, degenerates, and today's narcissistic, drug-addled strains. The path outside is more treacherous, but the life is rich and full of deep experiences.

> *"…since I cannot express myself except in pagan terms, I would rather keep quiet."*
>
> *Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891)*

I went out with her on a break, to make a "path through severe practice." She took a trail up the mountain a few kilometers to the west. It was tough on my knees but I made it to the summit: a series of wide stone shelves that overlooked the valley. I watched her gaze quietly over the city — a prayer, I could sense it, for the suffering multitudes below; an angel so far above that no life could be discerned.

The next day I walked down to the city. It was closer, and gave a good dose of urban spoil. I love the everyday look of things, cataloging the textures of the streets: storm grates, sewer plates, trash piles, broken concrete, old doors, gates, latches. I criss-crossed the streets from the base of the mountain to as far as Su Yu Market. I know every one of them in thousands of close-up photographs, in more

detail than the old timers.

I hobbled together an old PC and set it up in my cell, shut inside a suitcase to keep it quiet. There I'd save all the photos and work on the book. Always working! I'd go from there directly to the dharma room. I wanted to prove, to myself, that the work wasn't something to be shut out. I brought it in like a sacrament. It nourished me *and* stabilized the practice. Nature allows any sort of activity, welcomes it. Why demand a sterile environment? The Patriarch always talked about building a Zen center in Times Square, so the students wouldn't attach to quietude.

> *"If you consider quietude right and commotion wrong, then this is seeking the real aspect by destroying the worldly aspect, seeking nirvana, the peace of extinction, apart from birth and death. When you like the quiet and hate the hubbub, this is just the time to apply effort. Suddenly when in the midst of hubbub, you topple the scene of quietude — that power surpasses the (meditation) seat and cushion by a million billion times."*
>
> *Ta Hui (1088-1163)*

The seat was very bright, nearly white hot. The state of the previous winter quickly rose again, blotting out everything. More focused and powerful, it required all of my resources. If my body was weak I would falter. Not

too much walking, I was careful about how much food I was taking in, and to let everything wash over me. I let nature direct what I should do and to what extent — the wisdom of long practice.

As the schedule began to dominate me, I would often reside in the ecstatic core, or else fall briefly into the blankness of sleep. The moments where I lost my hold a doorway, invisible; I could only sense it by the surge of energy that rose as I approached. There's something important here — in the crossing over the mind is freed. But the door itself is heavily weighted and not meant to be tampered with, like a heart, lung, or other organ. I've worked on this for many years. I was able, once, to hold my mind steady all the way to the moment of unconsciousness, then nothing, but the practice sprang back in place inside the dream, startling me awake.

It's a useful tool in going deeper into the stream, as it takes you along with it down to the depths, but otherwise fooling around with this is a waste of time. Only more data to sort through: an ephemeral sort that reflects the surface, which itself is of no real consequence; a vicious cycle that needs only a modern chemical to unlatch it. I'm sure we'll have it on the street before long, some sort of channel through to the surface that, like Claire in Wender's "Until the End of the World," creates a new

breed of junkie.

There's another door, infinitely more remote. The wild energy of the previous winter pushed me toward it, unknown until the latch was thrown. As the practice continued to deepen I was able to penetrate farther, with less effort, to the point that I finally rode all the way through to the tapering off into nothing. It wasn't into the abyss of sleep, but the other end, where the mind is lost in the field of the Absolute. Here the energy bursts had their own rising, crests, and receding. There was nothing remarkable about them, besides the rapture, but what was revealed there. At the far end I discovered a new door.

I will never forget the night of December 27th. Three weeks into kyolche, I'd just finished a walk into town and some editing in the suitcase. It was the last round of sitting, near 9PM. I had no feeling that something would occur. I wasn't holding my mind too tight, but easily in control of it, plenty of energy, when a strong gust of wind hit the window behind me.

"Are you ready?"

I thought it the same internal dialogue, the same ceaseless chattering. There was no thing discernible, nothing new, only the heat and sound and vibration of a concentrated mind steadily increasing in pitch. Somehow, instinctively, I held my mind *very gently*, with a deep feeling of my own

purity and that of all things. My mind was even, with no concerns. As I continued, the energy field tightened — a concentration of light and a constant ringing as I neared the door. The tight-walled blue center pulsed brightly, ever faster. I latched on to the knife-edge of it, refocusing every half-second, pressing forward — gently — to the heated core.

The ringing continued to rise, together with other indefinable sounds and a rapid fluttering of light, like bird wings. I saw only a tight glowing mass emanating in surging pulses, my eyes nearly pressed closed from the intensity. My vision became more and more broken apart, with plates of static slamming past patches of pitch black. I reached a point where I could go no farther and dug in firmly for a long period of just holding ground. My body shook uncontrollably, with fits of trembling, until there was a softening; a dip in the energy field. At once a surge of rapture rose and enveloped me, and I was pulled through the door.

The blue core of this state, the thread of consciousness, is blurry or imperceptible normally, but when the practice heats up it can become more defined. It tightens as one nears the edge, what we're able to perceive. If you're able to control the flow of energy out, and keep a gentle hold on the surface, and stay with it a long time without

getting rattled, the mind will be drawn up in a tremendous surge of energy, and so exit the thread. It's possible. I wouldn't think many have made it through, as difficult as it was.

When I approached the door I could feel the excitement of it. It stays with me. But it remained invisible. I was able to pass through it only when the heavens aligned, the body and mind were purified, and all concerns far away. What did I see there? It can't be described, besides, I have no idea what it was. The complexity of the human body alone, not to mention all sentient life, the web of consciousness must be even more so. A similar case was noted by Tu-Shun (557-640 A.D.), who labeled it the "Net of Indra," but his account seemed as far away and quaint as someone describing a rocket as "a chariot of fire that rode across the heavens…" nearly indecipherable unless you actually saw it.

Since I don't want to leave you with a historical account alone, I'll give you my impression. Imagine an infinite span of interconnected strands, a very dense, organic web not all the same color or evenly distributed, but largely neutral in tone and laid out flat, as if held by some kind of gravity. There was a great deal of activity; the strands flashed with some sort of current, a sense of turmoil and noise running through them: a dull sensation, a convec-

tion nearly boiling with the movement of life. The activity was greater in the dense areas, where knots formed from the many interconnected strands; collectives of human consciousness. I say this because I could hear faint voices at the nearest knot, all jumbled together in conflict. Quieter threads branched out from there and down to depths unknown. It must have included every sort of life, down to the mineral.

I was locked in, my mind completely clear, still, euphoric, with a feeling of sadness along with the rapture. What I saw had no glamour to it: life filled to the brink with suffering and turmoil, everything feeding on each other. It was hard on me. It changed me. I don't know how long I was in, only a few minutes, when my heart began beating erratically and I was forced to return.

But the world is never the same. How long this story has gone, and we are still at a formative stage. Be glad I didn't start earlier! Here began my descent into cubism: blocks of light, vivid colors, all with some implication — if things can be explained with anything approaching experience. Perhaps it is best left in a poetic language? Since there was already a breakthrough of some sort, life pulsed through me in a new way. A tap left on day and night, the flood couldn't be managed. What chance did I have to lead a normal life? Since it came apart on its own, I left it

where it was.

Work stalled with Steve just as my mother received a hurricane relief check from "A Road Home." As I finished jacketing her trailer in 26 gauge steel, I received word that Steve had received a $10,000,000 lawsuit. Someone had been injured on the property — so all of the work I had lined up was cancelled, my art projects put on ice. At the same time, he'd found a new fiancé that had already moved in. My LA situation had folded overnight. The time was ripe. I built a small hermitage on the back of my mother's land. The lot was overgrown with myrtle and tallow, trash trees that come in after a fire. The forest gave out to a small green pond. I picked a site to the north of it, just inside the canopy of trees. I built six feet above ground to avoid the damp conditions. Well insulated to survive the winter, it was made of hurricane salvage, with a large window overlooking the pond. It took a month before everything was nailed down, the night of October 14th — the full moon. The retreat would last more than one-hundred days, all the way to the new moon of January. The sitting was immense: twelve hour-long rounds with minimal breaks that only tightened as the day progressed. I designed the schedule to develop a practice resonance, spontaneously wrote it down months before. I knew it was coming. In fact, as the retreat neared I be-

gan sitting bolt-upright at 3AM every morning, my body primed and ready. I still do this.

The retreat began to glow with the light of practice. It was easy to give myself to it fully. The light came in differently after the experience in Korea, more quiet, more constant — enormous. No longer a glowing core but a mind state emanating everywhere at once. With no distractions other than my own troubled affairs, it wasn't long before I entered deeply into the field of the Absolute. Along with this immediacy the concerns of the world would find their way in: all my things hidden in a wine cellar in Los Angeles, my projects on a thin lifeline, all the old family karma that surfaced when I entered the old woods. Between these two worlds I toiled insolubly, regardless of what came into view. Hour after hour the two realms captured me and were left untouched. As I came logically to loathe the turmoil at the surface, the light of the Absolute became dominant, became more and more accessible, and each time a new ground, a higher vibration, a deeper level of rapture. As the way was trammeled back and forth from the phenomenal world to the Absolute, the gate between the two was gradually worn through, until it was dissolved in the fire of practice. I was suddenly aware that the fabric of life, all aspects of it, were emanations of the Absolute, all of it cherished, loved, of divine form and

symmetry, every piece of it! Yet I was still caught between the two, taken by the sound of a kingfisher as it plunged into the pond, transfixed by the rapture emanating from the core — each remaining distinct. Not one, not two!

As I acclimated to the new flow of energy I began to see the teaching words and slogans as misleading — impossible to understand the way they were presented. I could see the original intention, but more clearly the quagmire in which most were trapped, repeating phrases with a fervor often mistaken for insight. Does anyone understand these words? All the teachings should be seen as a vast koan — whatever meaning can be gleaned from them should be discarded. It is not the real meaning. It will come later, when all the words are anymore meaningless, worthless against the brilliance of the original mind. When you're bathed in the rapture of the Absolute there will be a considerable amusement and satisfaction at pulling out a quaint expression of the dharma — so pretty and arcane and courageous, and nothing like the truth.

Afterward I returned to LA briefly and went to work tending to Steve's mother, who was in ICU after suffering a stroke. Steve had survived one a few weeks before with only a slight twitch, then his sister died unexpectedly. My days were spent holding his mother's hand, visiting her church to offer prayers, talking to the priests, nurses, doc-

tors, family members. Steve put me up in her house, in his sister's old room. It was there, in the middle of the night, full of wine and the suffering of the world, that I woke suddenly, sat bolt upright, my mind catapulted into a blissful state that has never receded. It was such a tiny moment for what it unleashed, so unexpected. It put me at the reins of a galloping stallion — a flash of silver in the night; the wild eyes dazzling, shining with an unbridled fury.

THE PATRIARCH WOULD NOT APPROVE OF THIS
BUT HE LEFT THE WORLD
BEFORE I HAD ANY DEEP EXPERIENCES
WHAT AM I TO DO?
THERE'S NO ONE LIKE HIM ALIVE TODAY
THE ZEN MASTERS I'VE APPROACHED
HAVE SHOWN NO INTEREST IN WHAT I'VE ENCOUNTERED
ONLY THAT I CONTINUE
THERE'S NO END OF SUFFERING IN THIS WORLD
AND WITH RESPECT FOR ALL OF THOSE
WHO'VE BROUGHT US THIS FAR
WE MUST GO FARTHER
THIS BOOK WOULD BE BEST WRITTEN AT THE END OF MY LIFE
BUT WOULD THERE BE ANY MORE REASON TO WRITE?
AND HOW MUCH LONGER
WILL I SLOG THROUGH THESE SOUTHERN SWAMPS?
STARING INTO THE VAST UNKNOWN
THE ABSOLUTE
IT'S NOT SOMETHING THAT CAN BE CAPTURED
IN A CLEVER PHRASE AND PUT ON A SHELF
I'VE TRIED TO CIRCUMVENT THIS
BY GOING INTO THE MEAT AND BONES
OF THE LIFE OF AN ADEPT
BUT MAY HAVE ONLY ADDED TO THE PILE
IF THERE'S SOMETHING HERE THAT INSPIRES YOU TO PRACTICE
ALL OF MY LIFE'S STRUGGLE HAS BEEN WORTHWHILE

twenty-one. EVERYTHING THAT HAS BEEN LOST IS GAINED

The train can be seen from far away, a single light blazing in front, heavy machinery boiling out of the horizon — for me alone. Oh, there were others, but each of us must've felt the same as the iron beast pulled into the station. What an empire we've built! It hangs over us, a hulking infrastructure that seems to lie dormant for the random days when I escape to the inner city.

It was a great day, the feeling of going on retreat welling in me, something like a lovely dream you can never piece together — only it beckons from the chill in the air. I'd just finished a long season of work piled from end to end. Unfortunately, none of it was with a foreign embassy.

The train passed all the familiar causeways and on through the industrial parks and back lots of indistinct city after city. Late at night, with nearly everyone asleep, their jangle of nerves quieted, the miles were left to the chattering of the wheels. As I walked among them, enjoying all of their faces, I realized my world view had changed. I'd always had the conviction that I shouldn't interfere with the flow of things, that the Absolute had control of it. But a monolithic view doesn't give credit to the enormous leaps humanity has made, the incredible complexity of our interactions with each other and our environment. These two aspects — one does not negate the other.

The blue sky has to be painted before the fire.

or this

Eternal wind
cosmic rays blasting through every door;
a tiny bird tweets from the myrtle forest.

Compassion, the hallmark of religion, isn't something to emulate or uphold, but the natural mind-state that goes along with the realization of deep substance. The mechanism can't be fabricated from outside, though to

emulate the divine does put things in the right order. All of the built-up dogmas of the institutions have the feel of truth — they can't be called wrong — but they're a hollow thing that can't be substituted for real insight. If there isn't anyone around who understands, the teachings take on an element of religiosity that's farther down the trail where truth and what is held up as truth are incompatible.

What we talk about is not the actual thing, but a practice form designed for the mind to develop a resonance, or an acuity to recognize such. At some point it will be seen through for what it is, an empty mechanism with nothing holy about it, and discarded. The practice resonance is the important part, often overlooked in our application of the teaching. How will you understand mind if you're busy holding yourself to all the requirements of the form? It's not that some level of purity must be attained, where the thing is finally apprehended, but that through the steady application of whatever technique, the adept gains the ability to sink deeper and with greater intensity — until the logjam is let loose.

"If, as if in a dream, you see a light brighter than the sun, your remaining attachments will come to an end and the nature of

reality will be revealed. Such an occurrence serves as the basis of enlightenment. But this is something only you know. You can't explain it to others."

Bodhidharma (440-528)

The train raced across the continent, taking me back to the retreat cabin in Louisiana. Soon I'd be facing the wall. The thought was jarring. We are such social creatures, how could I adapt to such an environment? Yet I knew from long experience there was no loneliness, no pain of separation. It's going deeper into nature, love, samadhi, life. It's the transformation, the metamorphosis — a very real freedom, so striking against today's heady entanglements. Really, who is free anymore?

The practice, what can be said? It's an unending process, the horizon boundless. More and more I see the whole of it: all matter, all life in a moment of ecstatic union; the height of the wave — where all is brilliance. Until there's a complete realization and integration of all beings, and whatever that means — the birth of a new cosmos, the end of time — the life *is* the treasure: the rhythm established between long retreats and the reintegration into society. As the practice heats up, everything becomes polarized toward the Absolute. Like day and night, awake and dreaming, the fury and heat of the Absolute surges through the framework of the day to day, shines through

every facet, every turn, to the end of what we can endure — and again the furnace, until everything is hot. Like Rumi's moth to the flame the life is all rapture and turning to the light; the emotion not like a feeling we commonly know, but coalesced into a constant state of being.

A RETREAT SCHEDULE FOLLOWS
FOR REFERENCE
WHAT I USE FOR A 100-DAY SOLO
IT CAN BE MODIFIED TO SUIT YOUR REQUIREMENTS
FOR ANY LENGTH OF TIME
I'VE PARED IT DOWN TO MEDITATION ALONE
NO ELEMENT OF RELIGION OR CULTURE REMAINS
I CHOSE THE TWELVE-HOUR FORMAT
TO ALLOW A STRONG RESONANCE TO BUILD
THE SITTING PERIODS ARE THE SAME
FROM END TO END
THE BREAKS BETWEEN THEM ONLY TIGHTEN
AS THE DAY PROGRESSES
"THE SCHEDULE IS YOUR TEACHER."
ZEN MASTER SEUNG SAHN

WAKEUP	– 3:50	
MEDITATION	– 4:00 - 7:20	MEDITATION 4-5, 5:10-6:10, 6:20-7:20 (10 MINUTE WALK BETWEEN ROUNDS)
BREAKFAST	– 7:30	2 HRS 40 MIN BREAK
WORK PERIOD	– 8:00	
MEDITATION	– 10 - 1:20	MEDITATION 10-11, 11:10-12:10, 12:20-1:20 (10 MINUTE WALK BETWEEN ROUNDS)
LUNCH	– 1:30	1 HR 40 MIN BREAK
MEDITATION	– 3 - 6:20	MEDITATION 3-4, 4:10-5:10, 5:20-6:20 (10 MINUTE WALK BETWEEN ROUNDS)
TEA BREAK	– 6:30	40 MIN BREAK
MEDITATION	– 7 - 10:20	MEDITATION 7-8, 8:10-9:10, 9:20-10:20 (10 MINUTE WALK BETWEEN ROUNDS)



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

H. GREVEMBERG

BORN ON OCTOBER 19, 1965
RAISED IN A REMOTE FORESTED AREA
OF THE DEEP SOUTH
BEGAN PRACTICING ZEN IN EARNEST
AT THE AGE OF TWENTY-ONE
A RESIDENT
OF VARIOUS ZEN CENTERS
FOR TEN YEARS
HE PASSED THE KYORUK
A VERY DIFFICULT TRIAL
REQUIRED OF NOVICE MONKS IN KOREA
ORDAINED IN BOTH THE CHOGYE AND KWAN UM ORDERS
HE SERVED AS A ZEN MONK FOR TWO YEARS
SEVERAL MORE AS A SENIOR DHARMA TEACHER
HE NOW WORKS ON VARIOUS PROJECTS
IN-BETWEEN LONG WINTER RETREATS
BOTH THE 90-DAY KYOLCHE AND 100-DAY SOLO OF THE KOREAN TRADITION
AT THE TIME OF THIS WRITING
HE'D JUST FINISHED HIS FOURTEENTH
AT HIS OWN RETREAT CABIN
IN RURAL LOUISIANA

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"A NEW PARADIGM FOR ZEN IN THE WEST: TOWARD THE INDIVIDUAL."
H. GREVEMBERG


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